

PIETRO & BIANCA

(*or*, Alternative Facts)

by

Gardner Rich

TO Mary Elizabeth, when she is able to read it; but

FOR Janjira, here and now.

(2017)

Table of Content

| | Page |
|-----------------------------|------|
| Source and Disclaimer | 4 |
| Dramatis Personae | 5 |
| Act One | 6 |
| Act Two | 26 |
| Act Three | 36 |
| Act Four | 58 |
| Act Five | 79 |
| Endnotes | 99 |
| Appendix | 101 |
| Copyright | 105 |

SOURCE and DISCLAIMER

THIS PLAY, *Pietro & Bianca*, is an ‘historical’ drama based upon an anecdote that appears in Stendahl’s *Histoire de la peinture en Italie*.¹ The *Histoire* is found among Stendahl’s complete works as published in 1854 by Michel Lévy Frères, Libraires-Éditeurs, Rue Vivienne, Paris.²

A digitalized edition of *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* is available on-line at Project Gutenberg. It is the text which served as the basis for this adaptation of Stendahl’s anecdote, which has little sense of time, while this play compacts the events of many years into a cube of many days.

Although most of the characters in *Pietro & Bianca* are based upon historical personages, the play’s author must take his cue from the disclaimer that closes *Anonymous* (2014), a film which advances the Oxfordian line (to the expense of ~~Kit Marlowe~~ Amelia Bassano Lanier):

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. THE CHARACTERS, INCIDENTS, AND LOCATIONS PORTRAYED, AND THE NAMES HEREIN, ARE FICTITIOUS, AND ANY SIMILARITY TO OR IDENTIFICATION WITH THE LOCATION, NAME, CHARACTER OR HISTORY OF ANY PERSON, PRODUCT,³ OR ENTITY IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL AND UNINTENTIONAL.

LASTLY, NO ANIMALS WERE HARMED DURING THE WRITING OF THIS PLAY.

1 See Appendix, for Stendahl’s account.

2 See NOTE on Historical Accuracy, which ends the Appendix.

3 Most important, this item.

Dramatis Personae

Pietro (a young man of Florence)

Bianca (a young woman of Venice)

Cosimo I de Medici (Grand Duke of Florence, married to Eleanor of Toledo)

Francesco de Medici (Grand Duke of Tuscany, son of Cosimo I)

Giovanna of Austria (wife to Francesco and daughter of a Hapsburg Emperor)

Ferdinando (younger brother of Francesco and a Cardinal)

Bartolomeo Cappello (Bianca's father, a nobleman)

Archbishop Grimani (Cappello's brother and Bianca's uncle)

Cardinal de Medici (brother of Grand Duke Cosimo I)¹

A Franciscan Friar

Merchant Bonero (a dealer in quick lime)

Constanza (his wife)

Zenobio Buonaventuri (Pietro's father, a clerk at the firm of Salviati)

Hortensia (his wife and Pietro's mother)

A Youth

A Maid

A Nurse

Attendants, Bakers, Cooks, Courtiers, Guards, Thugs, and sundry Others (but not too many)

SCENE

Italy in the mid-16th century

ACT ONE

Scene 1

[Venice. More or less in 1564. Before the house of a MERCHANT on the Via Allegria, a young man, PIETRO, knocks upon its heavy door. After a moment, the door opens widely.]

MAID [broom in hand]: (Officiously) Good morrow. Please state your business.

PIETRO: A word with your master.

MAID: (Looking him over) And who shall I say is calling?

PIETRO: His illegitimate son.

MAID: What?! (confused) Well, I never! (motioning with her hand)
Away from here!

PIETRO: Just say that he has a visitor, from his home city.

MAID: From Florence?

PIETRO: That should serve.

MAID: You're having me on, young sir, and from the first!

PIETRO: But not having it off, at last. Give me that!

MAID: (Shaking a broom, but laughing) I'll give you what!

PIETRO: May I speak with him? PLEASE.

MAID: (Sizing him up again) You're brash enough to be from Florence!
All right, then. I'll see what I can do.

[MAID disappears into the house]

PIETRO: (Bowing) I thank you.

[Another moment passes. A man appears.]

MERCHANT: Ah, Pietro! My dear young man, and welcome! But tell me: what brings you here?

PIETRO: Well, I've come to Venezia to find my fortune, as they say, the prospects in Florence being narrower.

MERCHANT: Florence narrow? I thought you would be a painter!

PIETRO: As did I, good Bonero, but if one can't paint in Florence, where can one? Father made me a clerk.

MERCHANT: Ah yes, to follow in his footsteps. Or rather, ink spots. I see.

PIETRO: Such is society; and, as I say, I find it all too narrow.

MERCHANT: Between thee and me, I'd light out myself before sitting at a desk for thirty years. Here in the north...

PIETRO: ...with its clear light, who knows? Yes, I may yet make a painter.

MERCHANT: Ha, so that's it! You've come seeking Titian?

PIETRO: And a patrician, for a patron. Could you put me up?

MERCHANT: Would I let you down? There's no question! Come in!

PIETRO: As always, you are kind. [He enters]

MERCHANT: Well, I used to carry you on my shoulders – but now you could carry me! Besides, you'll earn your keep. I could use your help while you find your fortune.

PIETRO: Done! Perhaps I have found it already.

MERCHANT: Perhaps you have.

PIETRO: So then a question, good Bonero. I really must know!

MERCHANT: Know what, Pietro? Ask away!

PIETRO: A young woman. I saw her at a window. Such a vision! I nearly fell from the gondola...

MERCHANT: Oh, yes. Of course. You and every other buck in this city. And cities round, as well. You can only be speaking of the fair Bianca. But, her father guards her well. Morning and evening, she reveries from the sill of that upstairs window, looking down upon the canal and the streets she is n'er allowed to trespass. Everyone regards her. And talks of her. One would think there is no other woman in Venice, and no other window!

PIETRO: Bianca! A name as white and pure as her face!

MERCHANT: What ho! Already? You've got it bad, and that's not good.

PIETRO: Whatever could be wrong with it?

MERCHANT: Why you, of course, a Buonaventuri! Good stock, your family.
But she, by birth, is a Cappello. That stock is on a different shelf.

PIETRO: (Reverently) Cappello. Bianca Cappello.

MERCHANT: Yes, a Cappello. So, you'd better *take stock!* My dear boy, you'd
need a fortune to make her your fortune, how much less to marry into her
fortune, which is unfortunate, by all three Fates. Yet, it is so, so let it go!

PIETRO: Ney, good Bonero! It may be my fate to tempt Fate.

MERCHANT: You'd be rolling loaded dice! The Cappellos are *established*, don't
you realize. They are *connected*. Her father has more expectations for her
than your father has for you, bet on it!

PIETRO: (Hesitates; changes the subject) But where is your wife? Where is
Constanza?

MERCHANT: The morning market, I should think, picking greens and tubers.
(calling out) Maid! (without real exasperation) Oh, where is that woman?
Maid!

[She enters]

MAID [sans broom]: What will you, sir?

MERCHANT: My young friend, Pietro, has come all the way from Florence.
Would you please set out some sweetbreads and good drink. Time to
break his fast. But first, draw a warm bath. (to Pietro) You would like a
bath, would you not?

PIETRO: (Sniffs himself) I think I need two baths.

MERCHANT: Take as many as you like; then come eat.

PIETRO: Right. Two baths, then breakfast.

MERCHANT: Off with you. Glad you're here, my boy.

PIETRO: It's good to be here. (Exiting, he murmurs "Bianca Cappello")

[Exeunt, PIETRO and MAID]

[The MERCHANT paces about, then stops beside a globe. He spins it. Then again.]

MERCHANT: *Round, and round, and round it goes; and where it stops...* (with his hand)
Tsk. (Shaking his head) Methinks I should be *Pietro*, a name proper to a merchant of quick lime, and that young man be *Bonero*. But what's in a name? *Bianca Cappello*. Is she yet fifteen? – and already she's nearly spilled a gondola. Hm. One day soon, she may launch ships.

Scene 2

[On the street, at night, beneath the upstairs window]

[BIANCA appears in candlelight. Below, PIETRO hides in the shadows.]

BIANCA: (Sighing) Another day, another night. Yet another moon. Would this phase could pass soon to fullness. Another night, maybe two, then all will be bright as silver. And my... my... ahhh, yes. But, no. Ah, me.

PIETRO: (Aside) She sighs and speaks! Dare I?

BIANCA: Ah, me.

[NURSE, offstage]: Bianca! Come away from the window, you'll be seen! Or at least blow out the candle.

BIANCA: (Turning) Why? No one's about, good Nurse. There's naught but the narrow walk along the narrow canal, and no one taking it.

[NURSE]: Come away, I say! Observe the proprieties!

BIANCA: (Annoyed) Oh!! (She pulls away and disappears)

NURSE [onstage]: (Comes to the window) There, that does it. (Closes the shutters)

[PIETRO comes out of the shadows]

PIETRO: Zounds! Another night without so much as a syllable.

[ENTER: Another YOUTH, who draws a dagger]

YOUTH: As to that, I'll slice you before you utter so much as a phoneme!

PIETRO: Huh?! (Turns and draws his dagger) What's this? Who are you?

YOUTH: Your better, that's who, and one with prior right!

PIETRO: Prior right? *Prior right?* Whatever do you mean?

YOUTH: You, my presumptuous master, are an interloper!

PIETRO: Come again? Are you daft? You, who speak of presumption!

YOUTH: If daft, then no more than yourself, and likely a lot less, seeing that you are here in the shadows!

PIETRO: As are you! You may be unhinged, but at least you're no thief. So tell me then, sir, what's the beef?

YOUTH: You, sir. You're the one on the hoof, champing beneath the window of my fair lady!

PIETRO: How musical the image. A librettist, are you – a poet wannabe?

YOUTH: As such, I'm learning the craft, thank you very much.

PIETRO: Uh, god. How come you to this, your drawn dagger?

YOUTH: How now? Look! You yourself are drawn!

PIETRO: But only after you!

YOUTH: (Considers the riposte) Quite so. Nevertheless, as I say, you are *after* me in every way! I've been here a month! No, two; coming on three. Is it? But what is time.

PIETRO: Is that so? I've not seen you. Not a bit of it. As for me, I have stood *right here*, speechless, every night for a week.

YOUTH: Is that so? I see. (Sheaths his dagger) Unhand that pointed steel. Which means to say, your silver dagger, put away. Thereafter, you have my permission to hear me out. We'll get to the bottom of this!

PIETRO: Humph. (Sheaths his dagger) Fine. Now have your say, and it better be good. *Enthrall* me.

YOUTH: That I will, I assure you. And it will be memorable.

PIETRO: Prithee, poet, get to the point.

YOUTH: Call me poet? And what, pray tell, do you?

PIETRO: Why? What's the difference?

YOUTH: One should know one's adversary.

PIETRO: Paint. Okay? I paint. Now do get on with it.

YOUTH: A painter, you say? So, here 'tis, painter: Our paths have – how would a poet put it? – crossed. Star-crossed. Forsooth, the stuffing of tragedy. Especially should we end in a duel, to put a fine point upon it.

PIETRO: Ridiculous. Even absurd. Hardly a tragedy. I think you mean...

YOUTH: A farce, perhaps yes; or a trick of the Trickster.

PIETRO: I thought you were to explain this right of prior claim, or claim of prior right.

YOUTH: Yes, that too. A week have I been away from here, but only in body. My mind keeps returning, to stand beneath this window, as my entire self has done since two moons previous to this one, now waxing.

PIETRO: What's that to me?

YOUTH: A demonstration that your claim is hardly first in time, and so mine is first in right.

PIETRO: Again, what's that to me? This isn't England. There's no common law in Venezia! Nor is this matter a dispute over property, unless you've exchanged vows with the object of your... seeming obsession. Desire, lust, love. Affections, if you please. Whatever. But I take it you have not done so. You have not *contracted*. In which case, there is no claim, there is no queue, and time has nothing to do with it. Q.E.D.

YOUTH: Man, are you good. But you're far too rational to be a very good painter.

PIETRO: Never mind that. What, precisely, is your standing to even date?

YOUTH: As of today, fair Bianca herself has said nothing, though her nurse has rebuffed me twice. I become discouraged at times, but I am not easily dissuaded or disheartened. I hope to win her heart by dogged persistence. Tail wagging, I suppose. You may smirk if you will. Nevertheless, there it is.

PIETRO: No, no, no. This won't play, though it may make for satiric verses in *terza rima*, penned by a poet other than yourself. Dante, were he still with us. So now what?

YOUTH: I await your suggestions.

PIETRO: Oh, no. After you, as always.

YOUTH: Then practical matters first. Are you any good with that dagger?

PIETRO: Well, as we've seen, there is one way to find out.

YOUTH: Yes, surely – but we've already covered that. Agreed?

PIETRO: (Shrugs) Agreed. I second the motion.

YOUTH: Then the motion is carried. But matters similar to this so often end tragically, and tragedy turns on Fate; so I say we put fate to the test.

PIETRO: Meaning?

YOUTH: The toss of a coin.

PIETRO: Chance, then. You would let this determine your course? The probability of one side over against another? *Dumb luck*.

YOUTH: Whatsoever you will. Are you game? What say you to this form of courage?

PIETRO: All right (reaching into his pouch). My last ducat. Do we toss to decide who will toss it?

YOUTH: That regression would be infinite, and we haven't got all night. No. You go. It's your ducat.

PIETRO: No, I insist. You toss. After all, Bianca Cappello is meant for me, and you yourself shall prove it, when you call it heads or tails.

[The coin passes from hand to hand.]

YOUTH: (Inspecting it) It appears right enough, and not unfairly weighted.

PIETRO: What matters the weight? As I say, you call it!

YOUTH: Then I will.

PIETRO: But wait! On what else are we agreed, besides sheathing daggers?

YOUTH: Ah, that. Simply that when you lose, as loser you will leave the field, indefinitely. Is that clear enough and fair?

PIETRO: But supposing one of us wins the toss, yet, having weak cards, cannot win at hearts?

YOUTH: Then that one will have lost the trick altogether, and the other would be free to play on. With or without trump.

PIETRO: Then the toss decides who plays first.

YOUTH: Exactly. There is more than one way to settle up like gentlemen. Pistols, épees, rapiers and daggers, read 'em 'nd weep, the toss of a coin.

PIETRO: Done. Then let fly and call it, poet!

YOUTH: Done! (Tossing the coin) I say heads!

[The coin falls to the ground.]

YOUTH: (Peering at it) 'Tis tails.

PIETRO: Tails it is, then, and you've not won.

YOUTH: Two out of three?

PIETRO: Then three out of five? No, my good friend. Are we not, as you say, gentlemen?

YOUTH: Oh, to be in England, and a common law jurisdiction!

PIETRO: Ha! But soft, for here's what I say: your England values fair play, does it not? And we are free men, not slaves to necessity.

YOUTH: What are you driving at?

PIETRO: Why, the testing of fate. Is that not where we started? If the fair Bianca is truly meant for me, as I believe she is, then it will take nothing more than for me to speak to her at long last. For what's the proverb? "*Who e'er did love, who did not love at first sight?*"²

YOUTH: (Doubtful) Maybe somewhere I've heard something like that.

PIETRO: Well, then, as we be gentlemen: Tomorrow night, I will lay down my cards. If I fail to take the trick, then fate will leave you be up to your aces. So to speak.

YOUTH: Are you serious?

PIETRO: Believe me, the stars have made her mine, and I know it.

YOUTH: Enough said. You're the prestidigitator and temporary victor. Just now, I'll take my leave, and wish you *not* to break a leg. *My mad Master.*

PIETRO: And much the same to you, *Your Apprenticeship*. Keep the ducat.
I won't be needing it.

[EXEUNT.]

Scene 3

[Morning, before sunrise. Inside Chiesa San Fantino, a small church under restoration in the sestiere of San Marco]

[PIETRO is kneeling before an unfinished altar. There are sundry craftsmen's tools strewn about; a ladder, pulleys, and a scaffold. Apparently, he has been in the chapel some time, for he is now beseeching Heaven, his clasped hands held high]

PIETRO: ... such I promise, Blessed Father, whether or not you find me
worthy; whether or not your Angel directs my steps. I pray you: fix firmly
my star in thy firmament, neither bright as Bethlehem, nor for mere gold
or sweet cicely, but for the love that you, in your infinite wisdom, saw fit
to ordain at the beginning of the world. And make me truly...

[Enter: a Franciscan FRIAR]

FRIAR: My son, you should not be here!

PIETRO: (Startled) I... I was...

FRIAR: Don't be frightened. Perhaps you do not know, this chapel has
been closed for years. In better light, it would be clear that the work of
restoration remains unfinished; and so, therefore, none may enter here, lest
they be artisans.

PIETRO: I *am* an artisan, Father, a painter from Florence. I've come to this
place because no one comes. This chapel is unfinished, and as incomplete
as I am. I'm here to pray God to...

FRIAR: To restore you?

PIETRO: To make firm my fate. To make me whole.

FRIAR: Say you faith or fate? (Advancing cautiously) What, to make you
whole? Now there's a thought. A notion I rarely hear. It must be then the
case that you feel...something missing. Some part of yourself. Is that so?

PIETRO: (Nods slowly) 'Tis so, Father. But how could you know that?

FRIAR: Oh, I have not always been a monk, my son. For example, I was once a soldier of this republic – and that called for faith in the face of grim fate. Nevertheless, if I recall rightly my feelings when of tender age, then that part you feel missing is a rib.

PIETRO: (Pauses to think) You mean our First Parents, in the Garden?

FRIAR: Yes, by the bones of primeval giants, something of that sort.

PIETRO: You are surpassing wise, Father.

FRIAR: I? (Shrugs) I've not forgot what it means to be young, is all.

PIETRO: (Seizing on this) Then you will surely understand! I know you will, you must!

FRIAR: And what is that, my son?

PIETRO: That *you* must be *here*, in answer to my prayer. God has sent you!

FRIAR: Oh, now... One should not assume mere coincidence signifies...

PIETRO: (Excited) Then *why* are you here, good Friar, in the very moment of my asking? No one comes here, as you have said, and yet here you are!

[Offstage, a rooster crows]

FRIAR: A cock on cue, seemingly. Perhaps you had better tell me how all this adds up. Who is your young woman, if I am right in assuming there is one?

PIETRO: There is, good Friar. Her name is Bianca Cappello.

FRIAR: (With raised brow and eyes wide) Bianca Cappello?

PIETRO: Then you know of her?

FRIAR: (Nods) I know of her. And I know she is not meant for a painter from Florence. Believe me, the Cappello do not trifle, and your feelings may prove a danger to you, my son. I know whereof I speak, for among their number is a bishop, my nemesis. No, she is not for you.

PIETRO: She is truly meant for none but me! Call it an intuition, or love at first sight, or even precognition! Whatever you will, good Friar! 'Tis no flight of fancy or wild imagining. She is my destiny.

[Offstage, a rooster crows]

FRIAR: Hmm. Destiny, fate, free-will, the will of Heaven. So many things are beyond my comprehension; nay, cognition. What I do know, seeing you've convinced yourself, is that no other convincement is possible. It is in the nature of things that a fresh face should prevail over an argument from reason.

PIETRO: Then, good Friar, you would help us?

FRIAR: Dare I ask, help you how?

PIETRO: Confess us both; then, with holy vestments, us conjoin!

FRIAR: Conjoin? Marry, and in secret?!

PIETRO: Oh, I beseech you! I pray you, Father, as you pray to our Father in Heaven!

FRIAR: Beseech if you will, but do not pray to me. One of us should know his place! (Aside) But why, I sometimes wonder.

PIETRO: (Bowing his head) As you say, Father.

FRIAR: What age is your Bianca, this daughter of the Cappello?

PIETRO: Fifteen springs and as many summers, plus or minus several days.

FRIAR: Oh, I see – She waits to marry late, following the new fashion. Yet all nature consents to it, so better late than never! She knows her mind?

PIETRO: As I know my own, food Friar! Then will you shrive us and marry us?

FRIAR: Such passion I have former felt, and such sureness in the urgency! Shall I deny your suit and produce fruit out of season? For such is in the nature of things! *To do that* surely would weigh upon my head as a sin of grievous omission. Heaven help me then, for thy commission I durst fain accept!

PIETRO An answered prayer! A blessing descends from highest Heaven!

FRIAR: One might trust that it be so!

PIETRO: And now I must go, but only to return with fair Bianca!

FRIAR: When?

PIETRO: Tomorrow, same time, same...

FRIAR: Station of the cross!

PIETRO: Yes! Now I must away. Tonight, light a candle for me, Friar!

FRIAR: Go then, and Godspeed!

PIETRO: Fare thee well 'til the morrow!

FRIAR: And thee, my son!

[Exit, PIETRO]

FRIAR: To marry in haste and repent at leisure, that should very please the Cappello. Who knows, Archbishop, whether fate it be, but now 'tis surely my turn to do a turn.

[Offstage, a rooster crows]

[EXIT]

Scene 4

[That night. Beneath Bianca's window, PIETRO waits in the shadows. A few moments pass.]

[Enter, BIANCA, appearing at the window. She leans out, looks long to the right, then to the left, and then slowly up to the night sky.]

BIANCA: There they are. The Pleiades. Six of them. And I discern the seventh! (Regards them, then speaks directly to them) Can you hear me? Oh, I am truly the eighth, thy shyest sister, hiding herself away, not only by night, but also by day. Would I could traverse that heaven, or run in an open field! (Sighs) Ah, me.

PIETRO: (Stepping out) And what about you? Do you mind that I ask?

BIANCA: (Startled, looking down) Who goes? Who's there?

PIETRO: A passerby, no more. A shadow in the night, made manifest only to pose that question.

BIANCA: (Hesitates before responding slowly and carefully) But why that question in particular, when there are so many others?

PIETRO: (Standing now directly below her window) Beyond question, there are too many to number.

BIANCA: (Guardedly) I hear calculation in that.

PIETRO: No more than can be counted on five fingers (cautiously waving his hand, without extending his arm). I bid you good evening, yet not yet good night, for I would talk awhile, being weary of walking. Still, I would not impose upon your meditation. Not for anything.

BIANCA: But sir, you already have done. Not that I mind.

PIETRO: Then we might chat?

BIANCA: Chat? (Looks back into the room, then again down below) We may, but only a moment. I have a nurse, Helena-Maria.³ She's supping just now. But after her soup, she'll climb the stairs to close this window.

PIETRO: And with it, the window of opportunity. Then that's ten times a pity, for many questions require patient answers, and more time than a mere moment.

BIANCA: What about you?

PIETRO: That would be one of them.

BIANCA: *No*, I mean the question itself: What about *you*? You, yourself!

PIETRO: Me? I'm a painter from Florence.

BIANCA: (Laughs) Do painters paint *en plein-air* at night?

PIETRO: They would if they could, when the subject is right.

BIANCA: The subject? That makes a painter a master! Are you a master?

PIETRO: If I am, then I must rule only to serve.

BIANCA: And what would you serve, sir?

PIETRO: The truth of natural beauty.

BIANCA: But this is a world of artifice!

PIETRO: 'Tis so. But I suppose one might paint the truth of one's unnatural perceptions, as one might paint the candle light upon your hair, or the glint on your bodice's brocade.

BIANCA: You can see all of that from there? I cannot see you so well! You must have hazel eyes, as farsighted as a falcon's. ⁴ But to what purpose? To snare a dove?

PIETRO: No, no – not even a field mouse. Some falcons are vegetarian.

BIANCA: (Playfully) From Vegetaria? Isn't that a city to the South?

PIETRO: Well, if it isn't, it should be, and many day's ride! But not as the falcon flies.

BIANCA: You have humor! But in my candle light, and in your moon light, one should play a part seriously, how much more sincerely, lest time be wasted.

PIETRO: Then why waste time? Must a part be played apart? Must voices stay in the wings?

BIANCA: Oh, thou nighthawk! That depends upon the stage directions. And mine are quite specific. Why wing you so?

PIETRO: From the wing, or on the wing? Are you not a' lure? Swing wide! Your directions must surely describe a stair that descends into night air!

BIANCA: Your words burn with passion's fire, sir!

PIETRO: All will be embers soon enough! *Carpe noctis!*

BIANCA: Seize the night?

PIETRO: Waste not this moon nor any night's bright stars!

BIANCA: Ah, me! If only... ah, me! If only I might find a safe way down.

PIETRO: If you fly down, I will catch you!

BIANCA: The stair shall be my flight! (Looks behind) Oh... (Looks down) And then we will talk?

PIETRO: For a moment, yes. We could talk yonder, by that fountain. Or hire a gondola and breathe free air!

BIANCA: No, not possible! Word of a rendezvous would too soon ply the waterways. (Looks up at the sky) A moment. One free moment. Oh, if only... if only... (To Pietro) Yes, maybe for a moment. But only for a moment!

PIETRO: And your nurse? By now she must be finishing her fourth bowl.

BIANCA: Ugh, my nurse! What can I say to her? I have it! With so many passages here and there, this house is nearly a labyrinth! I could say that while she searched for me in one room, I was searching for her in another! Did she not hear me call out for her?

PIETRO: Surely she'll take thee at thy word! Come down then, and hurry! I'll await thee in the shadows.

BIANCA: And there I will find thee! Go!

[Shutters the window]

PIETRO: My fate! To the shadows!

[Secrets himself. BIANCA exits the house from a small side door.]

BIANCA: Where are you?

PIETRO: Here! (Steps out and offers his hand) Come, this way!

BIANCA: (Taking his hand) Why you're shaking! Are you afraid of me?

PIETRO: Afraid to steal time, and afraid to lose it!

BIANCA: Then let us suspend this moment, if only a moment. Why search you so my face?

PIETRO: How can I not? I am a painter. I have been looking for your face everywhere, since before I ever came to Venice. I did not know I would find it here, yet here it is, with so much more to see than I imagined! In those eyes, your soul and your mind! I understand their depth and know their discontent.

BIANCA: In my eyes, I'm sure you see yourself, but you cannot see my heart or know my mind!

PIETRO: I can! Before I ever saw you, I knew you! Have I not recognized your face upon seeing it? Do I not know your voice? Here you are before me. Can I not see into and through your eyes? I know what you are!

BIANCA: Then pray tell, sir, what is that?

PIETRO: A prodigy. A manifestation. A phenomenon of nature, as pure as snow. You are as are mountains, blossoms, and sunsets. Is it not done to appreciate a sunset? Or any other phenomenon? Less so your mind?

BIANCA: I find you too clever, to peer into my mind and not at my bosom!

PIETRO: Oh, that too I see, and protest to say that such outward beauty and ideal proportion must correspond with the truth of your inward perfection!

BIANCA: Could that be so? And if so, what intend you to make or do with such perfection as that you claim to see?

PIETRO: I would make it immortal and proof against time! I am your painter! You will be my Madonna and Magdalene, my Sheba and Sarai! My Salome, my Ruth, my Beatrice and Judith!

BIANCA: This is much too much, and Venice is a city of masks! Are you not playing a role and donning a mask? Your heartfelt admission is all I ask.

PIETRO: Is such a mask an objectionable object, if indeed it be a mask?

BIANCA: Such question! Objectionable, no; for it is handsome, yes, and I judge it surpassing fair.

PIETRO: Then accord me the same as I accord thee. We're a pair, by every star in heaven's transfigured night, by that constant moon o'er our heads!

BIANCA: But the role, sir! Play you a role?

PIETRO: No more a role than play you. Else, we would surely be our own understudies, waiting in wings for a scene or two, and hoping to seize the stage!

BIANCA: Such suasion! (Regarding herself) And such novel sensation! My flesh feels floating adrift! My heart pounds like surf, and my blood is an undertow! Some tide is pulling me away, and you... you are the moon!

PIETRO: Then let betide this riptide! *Carpe noctis*, again I say! This rush of current is no bêtise! Cease to swim against it! 'Tis folly and unnatural foolishness! 'Tis blood, sweeps you away!

BIANCA: So easy to say, but to have my way, whatever can I do!?

PIETRO: Live! Follow your heart! Freely breathe the air! Seize this night and come away! We'll be far gone, by break of day!

BIANCA: Were it were so simple! There'd come nothing with my person.
I've no means, at all, have you?

PIETRO: I mean to have you, not a dowry! Could you live without a palace?

BIANCA: Most happily! This house is my prison, and Venice a penal island!

PIETRO: Then we will make our way to Mantua; and then, from there, to Florence! My family will welcome thee, and their fair city of patronage will provide for us. There's much work for painters! We only need to go!

BIANCA: Tonight, you mean!

PIETRO: Indeed I do

BIANCA: But sir, what is your name? I do not know it!

PIETRO: Have I not said? Pietro Buonaventuri!

BIANCA: Pietro! That makes you my rock and mooring!

PIETRO: I am! So let us find our way to Chiesa San Fantino, where we'll meet a friar! We'll be shriven and wedded ere the cock crows before the rising sun!

BIANCA: Yes tomorrow, love, tomorrow! Tonight I must pack a bag! With the house asleep, I will steal down the stairs, and meet you at San Fantino.

PIETRO: I will as you will, for our wills are now one. I'll make my way hence and await thee. But first, prove your promise, and seal it with a tender kiss!

BIANCA: I thee promise! I am yours. Wither thee go, I'll be with thee. So kiss me, my first and only one true love!

[They kiss; then kiss again.]

BIANCA: (Placing her hand on his cheek) Oh, I love you! Keep thee safe from now 'til then, and we will marry at sunrise!

PIETRO: Then by those eyes, tarry not to San Fantino!

BIANCA: Yes, San Fantino, and good night! 'Til then, my love!

PIETRO: 'Til then! Now hurry thee!

[Exit BIANCA, slipping through the small door]

PIETRO: By all the saints, and all the stars, she's true 'tis true! Sans rue!

[Departing, PIETRO sees the YOUTH in the shadows]

PIETRO: Sir! I see you there!

YOUTH: Indeed, it is I.

PIETRO: Then you've seen all?

YOUTH: And heard all.

PIETRO: Oh, this is providence, over and again, and all goes as Providence would have it, for tomorrow you will make me a best man and a witness!

YOUTH: I?

PIETRO: You! As I know you to be a gentleman!

YOUTH: I?!

PIETRO: Oh aye, sir, as sailors say. Come walk with me. We'll talk! There must be a bottle of porto somewhere in this *sistiere*.⁵ We'll find it!

[EXEUNT]

Scene 5

[In the church of San Fantino, where a single candle burns.]

FRIAR: Are you certain she is coming?

PIETRO: She swore it to me, Friar.

FRIAR: Then perhaps she is detained. Constrained, I mean. It's possible. Anything is possible.

PIETRO: Oh, where is our witness? Sleeping 'neath a table in a tavern, no doubt.

FRIAR: Forego it. Another witness will out, I'll see to it. But should she not come...

PIETRO: Oh, she will! She swore it to me, Friar!

FRIAR: And where will you take her, once all is accomplished?

PIETRO: To Mantua, then Florence. But first to a friend's house, here in the city.

FRIAR: Pray who this friend, that I may apprise you of movements? I will send news of the Cappello, their kith and their kin.

PIETRO: A seller of sundries and quick lime, on the Via Allegria.

FRIAR: Why that's Merchant Bonero, who supplies much for this project! This chapel alone has lined his money belt!

PIETRO: Indeed, 'tis he. I knew him in Florence. He's received me a fortnight, as host and employer. There's never a day he neglects to say "San Fantino".

[Enter, BIANCA]

FRIAR: Ah, here comes the lady. Look there: she has so light a foot, not a wisp of Bonero's dusty plaster rises from the floor! Nor hear we the crunch of shavings between wooden pews!

PIETRO: She might step on a flower without bruising a petal! And what is most remarkable, she soon will be mine, and yet not soon enough!

[Offstage, a rooster crows]

FRIAR: Oh, soon enough, my son!

PIETRO: Good morrow, love, good morrow! A thousand times, good morrow!

BIANCA: Good morrow to my soul's confessor, and to my soul's own double.

FRIAR: That's sweetly said!

PIETRO: Your eyes are red, and still beauty dwells within them! But tell me, my love: Did you not sleep a wink?

BIANCA: Think! How could I? My love has grown to such excess, a small bed can hold it no longer! I want thee, my love, to husband me, and love me to death, as I love thee!

FRIAR: (Aside, to the audience) How strangely said!

PIETRO: And I thee, to take thee to wife! On my life!

[Offstage, a rooster crows]

FRIAR: So come, my young wantons, for this stolen hour soon passes from violet to orange, thence to white brightness!

BIANCA: Let us make haste, for this lingering wrongs me.

PIETRO: Just as it wrongs me, my love and my light!

FRIAR: Yes, two wrongs, we all know, make never a right. The confession booth is just this way. Follow me and shrive your souls. After which, we'll make short work of tying the sacred knot of this two-into-one corporation, this mysterious merger, sanctioned by Holy Church. Then will you be on your own, against very long odds, but standing together whatever may come.

PIETRO: And let it come!

BIANCA: Come what may!

FRIAR: This way then, my children!

[Offstage, a rooster crows]

[Exeunt]

{End of Act One}

ACT TWO

Scene 1

(A chamber in Palazzo Cappello.)

[ENTER: BARTOLOMEO CAPPELLO and ARCHBISHOP GRIMANI.]

ARCH: (Speaking as he enters) ...into thinnest air! Vanished! My niece has...

CAPP: (Impatiently) Your niece and my daughter! When I get my hands on that young lady, I'll yank her hair by the roots!

ARCH: [Loudly, calling behind] Guard!

[ENTER: GUARD]

GUARD: Your Grace!

ARCH: Bring ye the nurse hither!

GUARD: Your Grace!

[EXITS]

CAPP: What is your intention, brother?

ARCH: Why, I mean to question her, naturally.

CAPP: She has thrice been interrogated.

ARCH: Yes, but not by me.

[Loud knock. The door opens. ENTER: GUARD leading the NURSE, who struggles at the threshold]

GUARD: The nurse, Your Grace. (Pulls her into the room, then shoves her forward)

NURSE: Oh! (Curtseys clumsily) Your Worship!

ARCH: Agh! (As if swatting a fly) How come we to this pass, Nurse?

NURSE: Pass, Your Worship?

ARCH: Don't try my patience, woman!

NURSE: No, Your Worship! I mean yes, Your Worship!

ARCH: *Humpf.* How did the Lady Bianca escape under your watchful eye?

NURSE: My eye was closed, Your Worship! Like all the house, I was asleep, Your Worship! I left her in her room, went to bed, and when I goes to wake her in the morning, she's already gone!

CAPP: And that young baker?

NURSE: He came to the door near nine of the clock, Sir!

ARCH: (Bored) To say what he had seen...

NURSE: Why, yes, Your Worship, as I says already to...

ARCH: Yes, yes, we know! But his report, Madam. Say again what *he* told *you*... and tell us *exactly*.

NURSE: Well, Your Worship! (Clears throat) Ahem! Well, he's standing there like a sorry sight, he is, and he says he's seen our Bianca, he has, and he thinks maybe we'd like to know what he can tell us, but he's only a poor journeyman baker, he says, and he's poor, so if the Master of the house could just see his way clear to...

ARCH: What did he *say*, woman!

NURSE: Why, that Bianca she's done run off with a painter! What else?

CAPP: Devil take him! Did your baker name this painter?

NURSE: He did, sir!

[Dead silence, the question having been answered.]

ARCH: Well, woman? Must we wring it out of you? *The name*, if it please you!

NURSE: Oh, let me see! It was ... Bontempelli. Buonarotti. Buonavoyagia... Buonaaaaa... Wait, I have it! Buonaventuri! Yes, that's it! Buonaventuri! Pietro Buonaventuri!

ARCH: And how did this apprentice baker come to know this Buonaventuri?

NURSE: Search me! But he said he was the best man. The baker, I mean. He was supposed to be the best man, but then one thing led to another, and...

CAPP: The best man?! You mean a marriage ceremony?

NURSE: Why, yes sir! Of course it was a wedding!

CAPP: A marriage with some damned *painter*?! Where?

NURSE: Chiesa San Fantino, he says to me.

ARCH. Nonsense! The church is closed! Are you sure he did not say Francesco? San Francesco de Paola... or perhaps, della Vigna?

NURSE: No, Your Worship, no. The young man was clear as crystal on this point. Chiesa San Fantino, he says to me.

ARCH: Then something *even more* is out of joint!

CAPP: Palle! (Furious) Putana!

NURSE: (Gasps, shocked by this language) Oh, sir!

CAPP: Wanton slut! I'll strangle her! My own blood!

ARCH: (Placing a restraining hand) Now, my brother, calm yourself! (Turning) You may go, nurse. Guard? Now!

GUARD: Your Grace! (Takes Nurse by the arm to pull her outside)

NURSE: Top of the morning, Your Worship!

GUARD: It's nearly noon, woman!

NURSE: (Tripping) *Oh!*

[EXEUNT]

[ARCHBISHOP closes the door behind them]

ARCH: Control yourself, please! Are you listening? Bartolomeo! We must be as measured as Marcus Aurelius!

CAPP: Yes, yes, yes! But what are we to do, Grimani?

ARCH. Arrange things. We must make arrangements. Mobilize.

CAPP: (Thinking) Yes, yes – approach the Senate. Entreat the Doge!

ARCH: Perhaps offer a reward for your daughter's safe conduct and return. Not so generous as to suggest desperation, nor so niggardly as to want true parental concern.

CAPP: A delicate matter, this.

ARCH: Who knows? If Buonaventuri is the gold-digging adventurer I take him to be, perhaps he himself will cash her in!

CAPP: Addle-pated bastard son of a whore-mongering... whatever his worthless father does for bread! We'll get him! Then a trial and death for this Florentine fornicator!

ARCH: Whatever you will. Just so order is restored and justice done! Now we must move quickly, to manufacture public opinion. No doubt good families will be sore-offended that your honor is impugned!

CAPP: Buonaventuri! Buonaventuri! That upstart will end his days like Abelard, singing *Planctus virginium* in the upper register in Lower Brittany! ⁶

ARCH: Balls, you say! O-ho! I can hear it now: *The Paraclete's* castrati choir! ⁷

CAPP: Come! Let's away to the Senate!

[EXEUNT]

Scene 2

(House on the Via Allegria)

[CONSTANZA is pacing in a chamber, expectantly.

ENTER: the MERCHANT]

CONSTANZA: What news, my husband?

MERCHANT: The nocturnal nuptial is a secret no longer! The clamor is general! Our citizens twitter like birds! (Abstractedly looking about) Where are they?

CONSTANZA: Upstairs, sleeping. Well, perhaps!

MERCHANT: Hmm. Probably not!

CONSTANZA: But isn't it wonderful? Amour! How many goes did we go, remember? Four?

MERCHANT: Five. Not that anyone was counting.

CONSTANZA: You were a roaring lion! And the next day? Go, go, go! O, where is that green desire? I don't mean only you! My petals are dry! A desert has swallowed your oasis, husband!

MERCHANT: Come now. (Drawing her to him) Don't say that. You are the well that sustains me.

[They kiss.]

MERCHANT: Truly, Constanza.

CONSTANZA: I love to hear you say my name.

MERCHANT: And I still love to say it.

[A longer kiss]

CONSTANZA: I am content. (Smiling, and shaking her head) But this world weighs one down.

MERCHANT: Yes. Indeed it does. And I fear its weight will soon weigh heavier. The Cappello...

[Slowly releasing the embrace]

CONSTANZA: What a fine mess! *We* were never so crazy, to give such offense!

MERCHANT: Two standards. There's less offense when it is the man who marries below his station!

CONSTANZA: You want a good thump on the head?

MERCHANT: Ha!

[She swings at him, he dances away]

MERCHANT: That can keep! Thump me later.

CONSTANZA: As you please! I won't mind keeping it for you!

MERCHANT: Seriously now, my Constanza! We must speak with our newly beds – *weds* – and sort things out. The Cappello have agents searching from Castello to Canarregio!

CONSTANZA: Agents?

MERCHANT: Hired thugs.

[ENTER: the MAID]

MAID: Excuse me, Sir. Madam. There is a young man at the door.

CONSTANZA: What about?

MAID: He wouldn't say, except that the matter is pressing.

MERCHANT: Pressing?

MAID: That's what he said. Pressing!

CONSTANZA: I suppose it must be, at this hour.

MERCHANT: Well, show him in.

MAID: Yes, sir!

[EXITS]

CONSTANZA: What can it be now?

MERCHANT: I fear it can be one thing only.

[ENTER: the MAID, with the YOUTH]

MAID: This is the young man. He won't give his name.

MERCHANT: Is that so?

YOUTH: My name is of no importance. But I have news to impart to your guests.

MERCHANT: How do you know we have guests?

CONSTANZA: Who are you?

YOUTH: It's better that I not say, except to say a drinking companion of Pietro's.

MERCHANT: I think you had better explain a little more than this.

YOUTH: A couple nights ago, Pietro and I exhausted a bottle of porto at *The Swan*. He was buying, even though he had won a bet between us. A bet on Bianca Cappello. He would marry her on the morrow, he said, and then make his way to Mantua. He said that he had been staying on the Via Allegria, with a merchant from his home city.

CONSTANZA: You're a clever fellow to work that out! Even more to remember it, if you were drinking porto at *The Swan*!

YOUTH: To be honest, Madam, it did not come back to me all at once. I spent the night under a table.

MERCHANT: Oh, yes... Been there, done that! Then what is your news?

YOUTH: That he is in danger! The Cappello will kill him!

MERCHANT: Are you sure of this?

YOUTH: They have already seized Pietro's uncle.

CONSTANZA: How do you know this?

YOUTH: I spoke with Bartolomeo Cappello, yesterday. And an archbishop.

MERCHANT: That would be his brother, Grimani.

YOUTH: Well, the point is, I told them what I know.

MERCHANT: You told them he is staying here?!

YOUTH: Not that. I told them that Pietro and Bianca had eloped. I know, I know... I shouldn't have done so! But I was jealous of Bianca, and, with my head split in two and my pouch empty, I wasn't thinking rightly. That's why I've come now, to warn them!

MERCHANT: Were you followed?

YOUTH: No. At least, I don't think so. I came by circuitous route. All the same, they will find their way here soon enough. The search is house to house, except for the palazzos of our fair city's power brokers.

MERCHANT: Then the Doge has ordered it. And they have taken Pietro's uncle?

YOUTH: They've thrown him into a dungeon. That's what I've heard.

CONSTANZA: Do you know him, husband?

MERCHANT: (Absentmindedly) No, I do not. What would he be doing here, in Venice?

YOUTH: There's one thing more.

MERCHANT: Speak then!

YOUTH: There's a reward for anyone who can find them. Pietro and Bianca.

CONSTANZA: And you've found them, haven't you!

YOUTH: I've taken my thirty pieces of silver. That's bad enough. I want nothing more than to make amends. (Hands over his pouch) Give them this, for their journey. A belated wedding present of ill-gotten gain.

MERCHANT: (Sizing him up) All right, young man. (Takes the pouch) I'll see it safely to the fugitives! And now it appears that, first thing this morning, I had best find a way for them out of this city.

YOUTH: That won't be easy. But, if you can trust me, and will come with me, I know a man who might help us.

MERCHANT: When?

YOUTH: Hm? Oh, tonight for leaving Venice, and this morning for arranging it.

MERCHANT: There's no time!

YOUTH: No time like the present moment! Are you coming?

MERCHANT: (Looks at Constanza, then back to the Youth) Yes, I suppose I am!

YOUTH: Well then, hie thee with me!

MERCHANT: (Shrugs) We're off! Lead the way!

[They move toward the door]

MAID: God give you speed, Sir!

MERCHANT: And armor!

YOUTH: Invisibility would be best. Come!

MERCHANT: I'm coming!

[EXEUNT: YOUTH and MERCHANT, with MAID following]

CONSTANZA: (Calling after him) Be wary, my husband! (Now following after him) Breakfast awaits your return! Warm bread and jam!

[EXIT, CONSTANZA]

Scene 3

(That night. The house on the Via Allegría)

[MERCHANT, CONSTANZA, and PIETRO are sitting at a table, peering over a map]

MERCHANT: This will take some courage, my boy.

CONSTANZA: Don't worry yourself, Pietro, that you lack courage to run the gauntlet, because you're surely crazy enough to do it!

MERCHANT: (With his finger, tracing a route on the map.) Right through here.

PIETRO: What, run the Rio San Moïse?!

MERCHANT: Yes, because it defies common sense! Who would expect a direct escape down the San Moïse to the Grand Canal? It's foolhardy, on the face of it. Look, you must think as *they* think. Bartolomeo Cappello's daughter would not abscond with a fool, would she? Which is why it's safer, I think, to do something foolish. Now here, at the mouth, a skiff will convey you toward Giudecca; but then steer west to open water and a fishing boat bound for Ravenna. Once your feet are on the mainland... Here... this is for you. (Gives him the pouch) These coins are the only friends you will have. They should be enough to see you from Ravenna to Florence. A present from your best man, who sincerely apologizes for missing the ceremony. He also booked your itinerary, one could say.

PIETRO: But what of Mantua?

MERCHANT: What of it? We were fortunate to make an arrangement for Ravenna. Mantua I leave to you, if you insist upon turning north, where I suspect *they* will be searching first of all. Mantua, Padua, and in Verona. Personally, I would go straight to Florence, where you know people who might help you. But, for now, let it go. En route to Ravenna, you'll have time to reflect.

CONSTANZA: Now, young man, hie thee upstairs and have Bianca put on the dress I laid out. She's likely to live longer if she's taken for a country girl. And your sister, come to visit Venice. So lie! That's how Abram protected himself *and* Sarai in the Good Book.⁸

PIETRO: True exemplar! I'll see to it, all of it, just as you advise. A thousand thanks for this! Upstairs with me then, to rouse Bianca and have her prepare herself.

MERCHANT: (Resolutely) We leave in an hour. Constanza and I will accompany you to the gondola. There's safety in numbers. Who knows? We may even look like a family returning home. Now go!

[EXIT, PIETRO]

CONSTANZA: Come husband, to the kitchen. You've not had a bite all day. You need a little something, before stepping out on a night like this!

MERCHANT: Yes. A little wine, perhaps.

CONSTANZA: And bread dipped in olive oil! Come!

[EXEUNT]

{End of Act Two}

ACT THREE

Scene 1

(Many days later. The house of Pietro's parents on the Via Larga in Florence.)

[BIANCA is crouching, wiping the floor with a cloth.]

BIANCA: There. (Stands up slowly)

[ENTER: PIETRO]

PIETRO: Ah, my lovely wife, and to her good morning!

BIANCA: Is it? I tell you, husband, we've been here too long. A fortnight already!

PIETRO: Eh? What's the problem? What do you mean?

BIANCA: What improvement upon Venice is this? What difference? I cannot go out. Nor can I breathe! Are we not prisoners of our own making?

PIETRO: But 'tis only for a time! All will pass! Your father will call things off! Such straits as we find ourselves in cannot continue indefinitely! Be ye positive! At least we find ourselves in Florence.

BIANCA: Even so, there are no music lessons in this house. No Latin and no Greek! I spend each day dusting, when I'm not washing plates or scrubbing planks! Why is there no maid? I see nothing but inconvenience! See you something other? It's bad enough that one must dress oneself! How much worse such menial chores!

PIETRO: Come now, Bianca! Can it be so very bad? 'Tis only for a time!

BIANCA: And what is time? Everything! This is worse than Venice! I cannot so much as look out a window! Me, with a reward on my head, and therefore agents everywhere, scouring! We've been here too long, I say! Oh, why did we not go to Mantua? And then to France! Here, we live like... like gophers. Is this what we wanted? And your parents!

PIETRO: What of them? My parents adore you! You should not think otherwise!

BIANCA: Your father tolerates me, but your mother? She's impossible! She rides and derides me constantly. It's 'Your Ladyship' this, and 'Your Ladyship' that, whenever she wants me to wash dishes and scrub the floor. We've been here an eternity, Pietro!

PIETRO: A handful of days, at most!

BIANCA: (Shaking her head) Your mother! I tell you, I hear the sneer when she calls me 'Your Ladyship'.

PIETRO: Gentle Bianca, it's still a fair morning!

BIANCA: What's that to me, when I cannot look out? How would I know, except for your report?

PIETRO: Then I'm your weatherman!

BIANCA: A house of our own, Pietro! We need a house of our own. With a maid!

PIETRO: As soon as I am gainfully engaged. Today, I have an interview, with a rich merchant

BIANCA: Oh, do find a patron and soon, I beseech thee! (Turns toward the door.)

PIETRO: Where to now, my love?

BIANCA: Upstairs. This is wash day. There are the bed-clothes to be changed.

[EXIT]

[PIETRO slumps into a chair. Almost immediately, his father, ZENOBIO, ENTERS.]

ZENO: What's on, f-for today?

PIETRO: The usual search for quotidian existence, Father.

ZENO: F-food, clothing, shelter, my b-b-boy! Or I'm n-not Zenobio B-b-buona...

PIETRO: Buonaventuri. We are Buonaventuri.

ZENO: Th-that's a f-f-fact!

PIETRO: Yes.

ZENO: W-we're a use-f-ful lot, we are. And p-practical.

PIETRO: Yes, Father.

ZENO: Wh-what w-will you do w-with yourself, n-n-n-now that you c-carry extra b-baggage?

PIETRO: Bianca, you mean?

ZENO: You're a c-clever lad, Pietro. B-but y-you must p-provide!

PIETRO: Yes, Father, I know.

ZENO: All letters, all learning, what do they profit thee, if your larder is short-supplied of p-porch kops and tweet posatoes? ⁹ I mean, p-pork chops and sweet topatoes. Will you eat a cry drust in old age and q-q-quaff oily w-water f-f-from the p-plaza's f-fount? Peck grit with the p-pigeons as an aide to-to-to digestion? Without some position, you won't even have a nest; how less l-l-l-l-likely a coop! L-look, it's not too l-l-late. I can still put in a word. Return to the f-firm!

PIETRO: The bank? I'll never make a clerk, Father!

[ENTER again, BIANCA]

BIANCA: I could not help overhearing. (Directly to Pietro) What's all this? You, settling for a position, when you're a painter! And this is Florence, as you say! Surely soon we'll have a rich patron! You'll find a chapel with a bare wall and decorate it! And when you are celebrated...

ZENO: Pietro? M-my son a painter? Who put that idea into your s-s-silly head? He doesn't know which end of a brush has the ferrule! He was a clerk at Banco S-S-Salviati, wh-where I put in a g-good w-word! Then, one day, he ups and d-disappears – and then he returns with y-you! W-well, imagine my surprise! And his m-mother's!

BIANCA: If you can imagine mine. What is your father saying, Pietro? Are you not a painter?!

PIETRO: Listen to me, Bianca! We define ourselves! I am a painter in my mind's eye. Actualization begins with visualization.

BIANCA: What-*ever* does that mean? Have you been dreaming? All this time?

ZENO: D-dream on, son! You a d-draughtsman? That's d-*daft*-manship!

PIETRO: We must think positively! What else is there? Where else to begin?

BIANCA: Ye gods! Pietro! Words have meaning! ¹⁰ Have you written your own private dictionary, too? One is not a painter without a brush in hand – and even then, there's room for doubt! Think you I am a scrub-woman just because your mother puts a brush in mine? Out upon it! There is an order of things!

PIETRO: But we might change that order, one word at a time!

BIANCA: Right. Then why not begin with 'painter'? Any deformation you please! Fine, be a painter then. Convince yourself, your friends, your former colleagues at Banco Salviati! No need to paint anything! Just scatter brushes and pigments about, for all to see. Don't forget to put a smudge on your linen!

PIETRO: Bianca! Bianca, I...

BIANCA: You told me a lie.

PIETRO: No, never a lie!

BIANCA: I thought I knew you!

ZENO: N-now my daughter!

BIANCA: (Turning) My daughter, now, is it? And my mother-by-law, am I her daughter or her maid?

[ENTER: HORTENSIA.]

HORT: Nor could I help overhearing!

PIETRO: Mother, she means no offense!

HORT: I have ears, have I not?

BIANCA: Oh, this house! (She runs for the door.)

[EXIT]

PIETRO: Bianca! (He runs for the door.)

[EXIT]

ZENO: R-really, Hortensia!

HORT: Now don't you side with her!

ZENO: She's young, and high born!

HORT: Well, la-ti-dah!

ZENO: Oh, this, my house! (Waving at her, he goes to the door.)

[EXIT]

HORT: And my house, too, husband! (Sits down, arms crossed.)

[LIGHTS down]

Scene 2

(Inside the Palazzo Medici.)

[ENTER, while conversing: Grand Duke COSIMO and CARDINAL de Medici]

CARD: But then, my brother, it is a question of the Cappello and their faction!

COSIMO: Yes... all things considered, I quite agree. However, the allusion was to the Serene Republic of Venice itself.

CARD: I see. Then you were referring to the Doge.

COSIMO: None other.

CARD: A capable man, Priuli, but less so than his predecessor – or so I am told.

COSIMO: Well, the inestimable Girolamo Priuli has sent his emissary to our fair city. He arrived this morning, sending forward a request for an audience this afternoon.

CARD: Ah. *That's* why I'm here. (Mulls that, then chuckles) Do you know? Our beloved Pope Pius II once received a Venetian ambassador by saying: "Your cause is one with thieves and robbers"!

COSIMO: Pius was known for his tactfulness. This story is true?

CARD: Oh, I assure you, brother.

COSIMO: Hmm.

[ENTER: a Charge d'Affaires]

CHARGE: The Doge's emissary. My Lord.

COSIMO: Yes, of course. Send him in.

[Exit, CHARGE]

COSIMO: (To the Cardinal) Prepare yourself, brother.

[ENTER: the EMISSARY]

EMISS: Greetings, Duke Cosimo! Doge Girolamo Priuli bids me salute you!

COSIMO: (Waves circularly) Shall we forego the usual formalities?

EMISS: Your Excellency. (Bowing)

COSIMO: Conciseness is the true art of an ambassador.

EMISS: Then it behooves a practitioner of the art to be as brief as practicable. To be brief, then: We cloth and spice merchants wish something of you, Duke Cosimo.

COSIMO: Hm. (Shakes his head) Spice merchants? (Smiles) It was not my intention to lecture this afternoon; but, we should not deceive ourselves. Being from Venice, you have surely heard of *Riva Degli Schiavoni*? The Slaves' Dock? The opulence of your city rests upon slavery, not spices. The nobility of your Venetian republic buy and sell humanity: Saracens, Mongols, Turks. They sell Christians as well: Germans, Greeks, even Russians, shipped from Tana at the mouth of the Don. Some go for galley slaves. Some are sold into seraglios. That many more are sold to work on Corfu, Naxos, Cyprus, and Crete should not surprise anyone. What is the proverb? *Prima son Vinizian, poi son Cristian* – I am a Venetian first, and then a Christian! (Chuckles) Cloth merchants? (Shakes his head) Serene Republic? (Shakes his head again) A lagoon of lawyers, vote-buying buccaneers, and offices sold to the highest bidder. A fetid mooring for convoys of graft-sponsored warships built in the Arsenal. Should Florence fail to recall that the Arsenal belongs to Dante's *Inferno*? Of course, soon after his visit to Venice, the divine Dante died of malaria. That's one version. But there are others. Perhaps inconveniently, the official record has vanished. This, too, should surprise no one. Venice, as we know, is a city of masks.

CARD: (Clears throat) What the Grand Duke means to say is that he is inexpressibly favored by your mission and would fain ask how he may be of service to your master, His Serenity, the Doge.

COSIMO: Yes. That's what I meant.

CARD: Then, the Duke would know precisely the nature of the matter at hand.

EMISS: (Uncertainly) Certainly. The Council of Ten has issued this Bill of Capital Attainder. (Presents the document to the Cardinal)

CARD: Very well. (Takes the document) Shall I? (Opens it and reads silently)

COSIMO: In regard to Bianca Cappello, is it not?

EMISS: Your Excellency.

CARD: The Grand Council of the Serene Republic affirms that Bianca Cappello is in violation of the laws and traditions of said republic. Immediate rendition is the request.

COSIMO: And if Florence complies with the Grand Council's request?

EMISS: Then Florence would be granted the status of Most Favored Trade Partner.

COSIMO: Such favored status is not to be ignored.

EMISS: Then, may I assume the cooperation of the Florentine government?

COSIMO: Assume first this hypothetical. Assume that Florence approaches Rome in view of placing your republic under interdict.

EMISS: I see. It *is* the case, then, that Pius IV is a Medici.

COSIMO: It is.

EMISS: Why would Florence grant asylum to this young woman?

COSIMO: That's a fair question. Let me think on it.

CARD: It appears this audience is at an end.

EMISS: (Bows, without speaking; then, turns on his heel)

[Exit, EMISSARY]

CARD: You wouldn't seek an interdiction, would you, Cosimo?

COSIMO: Would you grant it?

[ENTER: ELEANOR]

ELEA: Well played. I couldn't help overhearing.

CARD: Dame Eleanor, sister! Radiant as always.

ELEA: What, only a Cardinal today? You're dressing down! How now, my husband?

COSIMO: I thought you might have a few suggestions in that direction.

CARD: Yes, Eleanor. What think you?

ELEA: Rendition? Asylum? Before you decide either way, you should meet the young woman. Invite her here. It could prove useful to you.

CARD: Yes, it could. What say you? Brother?

COSIMO: Mm. Yes. So be it. For now, let's to the garden. There is a new marble I would have you see.

CARD: Oh? Who is the sculptor?

COSIMO: After you see it, you must hazard a guess, my brother. I want to know whether your eye is improving.

CARD: All I ever see are the formless lumps old Michelangelo is chipping at. I wish he could finish the tombs.

COSIMO: He has always taken on too much work. (Turning) You, too, Eleanor. Come!

[EXEUNT]

Scene 3

(The following day, inside the Palazzo Medici. The room has three chairs arranged en bloc.)

[ENTER: a Charge d’Affaires, hesitantly followed by BIANCA.]

CHARGE: (Indicates a place before the chairs.) If your Ladyship would wait here, please. Stand no closer; but no farther, either.

BIANCA: Here then, by your charge, Charge d’Affaires.

CHARGE: (Bowing) My Lady.

[Exit, CHARGE]

BIANCA: (Waiting expectantly) Ah, me.

[ENTER, without acknowledging or even noting Bianca, who curtseys: the Grand Duke COSIMO, CARDINAL de Medici, and Grand Dame ELEANOR. Silently, and in orderly fashion, they assume their seats. Once they are seated, BIANCA straightens herself.]

[A motionless moment passes.]

ELEA: Lady Bianca.

BIANCA: (Curtseys) Your Highness, Grand Dame Eleanor.

ELEA: This is Cardinal de Medici...

BIANCA: Your Grace. (She steps forward and bows to kiss his ring; then retreats.)

ELEA: And, of course, the Duke.

BIANCA: (Curtseys deeply) Your Highness, Grand Duke Cosimo.

[Another moment passes]

ELEA: Well. (Wryly) You, young lady, have created something of a stir.

BIANCA: Yes, Your Highness, though that was not my intention.

ELEA: You are married, are you not, to one Pietro Buonaventuri?

BIANCA: Yes, Madam, I am.

COSIMO: We understand that his father has a position at Banco Salviati.

BIANCA: He does, Sir.

CARD: This marriage was unannounced, was it not?

BIANCA: Yes, Your Grace, it was not.

CARD: Who is it that performed such a sacrament?

BIANCA: A friar, Your Grace, in the Chiesa San Fantino.

CARD: His name?

BIANCA: I do not know it.

CARD: How is it, then, that this anonymous friar agreed to marry the two of you?

BIANCA: Pietro made the arrangement, when they met by chance.

COSIMO: At Chiesa San Fantino? This is the report that we have received.

BIANCA: Yes, Your Highness. At Chiesa San Fantino. They met there.

CARD: And how did you meet young Buonaventuri?

BIANCA: By chance, Your Grace.

CARD: Again by chance?

BIANCA: Yes, Your Grace – at least, one may say so, though Pietro calls it Fate.

CARD: And you believe that?

BIANCA: Which, Your Grace, chance or fate?

[Silence for a long moment.]

ELEA: Well, young woman. I can see that you are no fool, although you may have acted rashly. You surely know that the government of Venice seeks to extradite you.

BIANCA: Oh, please, Your Highness, no. If I should return, it would mean...

COSIMO: Yes, we know what that would mean. You *could* become a Decappello, and your husband a Malaventuri. ¹¹

BIANCA: (Suppresses a laugh)

ELEA: Does the prospect of losing your head amuse you?

BIANCA: Oh no, Your Highness, not at all; but the Grand Duke's wit...

ELEA: Yes, the Grand Duke's wit.

[ENTER: FRANCESCO, who stands aside, arms folded]

[ELEANOR glances in his direction, but says nothing]

COSIMO: Now then, Lady Bianca.

BIANCA: Your Highness.

COSIMO: Our object, as we are sure you surmise, is to have a look at you before we return you to Venice – if, in fact, you do return. What think you of Florence?

BIANCA: Would that I could see it.

CARD: Yes, it is inadvisable for you to go out.

COSIMO: But, there is a remedy for that. You will take up residence, here in the palazzo, until this matter is settled. Then you shall have an escort, should you decide to go out.

BIANCA: But, Your Highness...

COSIMO: Is there a problem? It is already arranged. Your belongings have been sent for. As for your husband, we shall come to that, by and by. Just now, you are our main concern.

BIANCA: Yes, Your Highness.

COSIMO: (Looking in his direction) Lord Francesco, would you conduct Lady Bianca to the rooms prepared for her?

FRANC: (Bows) My Lord.

[COSIMO rises from his chair]

COSIMO: Then all is settled, at least for now.

[ELEANOR and the CARDINAL rise]

[COSIMO moves toward the door; then ELEANOR and CARDINAL follow]

[BIANCA curtsies; FRANCESCO remains standing with arms folded]

[EXEUNT: COSIMO, ELEANOR, and CARDINAL]

BIANCA: (Tentatively) Is this the way things generally go?

FRANC: Dissemble, distract, divide and rule? Is that what you mean?

BIANCA: I'm not sure what I mean. What do you mean, my Lord?

FRANC: Principles, from the first.

BIANCA: Such are first principles?

FRANC: No, second principles. Or so say I. The foremost is to enjoy oneself. Whoever deprives himself of pleasure doesn't know the world. So then, let us live to follow our desires, and freely, for the trick is to know that *all of this* is a ruse. A trick of the mirrors. Which means to say, a world of second principles.

BIANCA: My Lord, I take no pleasure in causing worry or trouble to Florence. You are right about mirrors. The whole world seems distorted. Everything is out of joint.

FRANC: That's only because there are many rumors about you. Such breed confusion, and confusion breeds unrest. Unrest can undo the order of things.

BIANCA: All of that because of me? Why so, my Lord?

FRANC: Because, paradoxically, that is the order of things.

BIANCA: Then you are saying that disorder is the order of things.

FRANC: So it seems. But remember: *all of this* is a ruse. At the same time, rumor and confusion are the life's blood of second principles. The *sine qua non*. No?

BIANCA: I think my Lord is suggesting some strategy, or perhaps, opportunism. Would my Lord please condescend to describe a scenario, by way of general illustration?

FRANC: He would, if you will call him 'Francesco'.

BIANCA: As you will, Lord Francesco.

FRANC: No. Not that. Please. Just 'Francesco'.

BIANCA: (Hesitates) If that pleases you, Francesco.

[They regard each other. Then, FRANCESCO breaks the gaze, turns away, and speaks]

FRANC: Rumors and confusion raise a mob. Betimes, a great number of angry citizens will assemble before the Signory, by whose command a charge is made before whoever is leader of the citizenry at the time, against whomever is their target on the day; the charge being, of course, a plot to usurp government with the backing of some noble family. Accusations fly, being met with other accusations, evidence is flimsy, and the city will lather to a frenzy. The accusations begin, not among the citizenry, whose purity of intent is generally agreed among the citizens themselves, but with dodgy reports from those who '*inform*' them. Enter the cooler heads: O, where has virtue gone in our public discourse? Is there no longer a set of shared values? Et cetera, et cetera. We've come through such a round, recently. On the other hand, and therefore conversely, the laws and the Signory may go for nothing when and where a vindictive nobility becomes incensed and funds a company or two of mercenaries that send citizens to their anxious beds, to sleep with one eye open. We see, then, that participatory government presents opportunities that less dynamical systems do not. Opportunities to the benefit, shall we say, of the well-positioned? ¹²

BIANCA: And how, then, does one become well-positioned?

FRANC: By various means. Read *The Prince*. Master Machiavelli dedicated it to a member of this family. A slender volume that is producing as much controversy and exerting as much influence as scripture. But know this: It is, at once, a safety advisory for republicans and a handbook for tyrants.

BIANCA: Then one's response to it would show one's true self in a mirror.

FRANC: (Smiles) Nicely put. You have a most captivating head, Bianca Cappello, within and without.

BIANCA: (Curtseys) My Lord Francesco.

FRANC: Hmm. That again. (Abruptly) I am told that your husband is a painter.

BIANCA: Not really, my Lord.

FRANC: Then that's ten times a pity, for someone should paint you. Perhaps while you are here, in residence. Bronzino might do it. He would surely make a muse of you. Even Velasquez, if we could prevail upon my mother to approach Philip with the idea. But you know the Habsburgs. Still, why not? In the long run, it's all in the family.

[ENTER: Music from an adjoining room; a Lutenist and a Flautist performing a pavane]

FRANC: (Stopping to listen) Hmm. My mother must have arranged that... for your benefit. Will you dance, my Lady?

BIANCA: If you will, my Lord.

[He takes her hand, then releases it. They dance briefly as the light goes down, and he again takes her hand to lead her out.]

FRANC: Come. I'll show you your rooms.

[EXEUNT]

Scene 4

[A chamber of Palazzo Medici. GIOVANNA is alone in her thoughts]

[ENTER, ELEANOR]

GIOV: (Surprised, but recovers quickly) Dame Eleanor! Bonne journée, my mother *de jure*!

ELEA: (Coldly) ¿Que tal?

GIOV: How am I? There's a question! One could say I am as wrong as rain. Why come you here? Surely not to seek advice. Nor have you ever liked me.

ELEA: Not quite. I neither like nor dislike you. Nor do I block your way, as you might think.

GIOV: Then you are indifferent.

ELEA: Again, not quite. To put it directly, as we seem to be speaking directly:
When I see you fumbling, my heart hardly goes out. Such foundering makes me
old, for it reminds me of myself, when I first came to Florence.

GIOV: Hm. (Shakes her head) I do not like Florence.

ELEA: No, you miss Vienna. As I miss Toledo.

GIOV: Then you are still sore displeased that I have wed your son?

ELEA: My dear girl. How could you be the sister, the daughter, and the niece of
Emperors and still ask such a question! Think! Had you any more say in your
choice of husband than I had in mine? We are brood mares, you and I, fit for
golden bridles. You *do* hear the *homonym*?

GIOV: (Rather flatly) A bride with a bit in her mouth, yes! Lead on!

ELEA: If it pleases you. Look in the mirror! You and I were made for unwanted
daughters, miscarriages, and still-borns, and to decorate balls and banquet halls.
In Florence, as anywhere, a marriage is a business arrangement, as is government
itself. A committee to manage the affairs of Florentine bankers. (Almost playful)
Although, in another sense, they may have affairs with whomever they will – as
might anyone!

GIOV: Are you suggesting one should take a lover?

ELEA: You've been married for a year – and I see Francesco for what he is. You
must see things objectively, Giovanna. Your power, such as it is, comes from
your cunt and cosmetics.

GIOV: Say you! Oh, that cannot be all! Is England not ruled by a Virgin Queen?

ELEA: Virgin? With public perception, illusion is all. Besides, you forget her
spymaster, Francis Walsingham. Of course, they need each other, do they not?
Such symbiosis is the amniotic fluid that blue bloods swim in.

GIOV: So then, have you a lover?

ELEA: Ho! You know, such an impetuous remark, made to someone other than
myself, could cost you dearly! Practice self-restraint, and learn to be politic!

GIOV: Meaning?

ELEA: Curb your tongue! And, use your head. A woman is opposite to a man,
when it comes to brawn and brains! Let not others know what you are thinking.

Otherwise, others will see that your influence fails to advance and your cosmetics are more than ambergris.

GIOV: Foreign ingredients, you mean.

ELEA: In this city, too many go down from fevers put down to malaria.

GIOV: (Considers this a moment) What else might we discuss?

ELEA: Well, let me see. Read any good books lately?

GIOV: I've started Niccolo Machiavelli's *History of Florence*, as this family offered him the commission to write it.

ELEA: Indeed. The Old Nick wrote that book after our family 'put him to the question', if I may borrow the Inquisition's euphemism. But then, Machiavelli was in and out of this family's good books, then in again. I myself have been reading about Pier della Vigna. He is another example. He was a capable man appointed Chancellor by your uncle's predecessor, the Emperor Frederick II. Frederick thought himself betrayed by della Vigna and imprisoned him before plucking out his eyes. In disgrace, and, as it happened, undeservedly so, Pier della Vigna hit his head against the stone floor of his cell, until his skull cracked and his brain oozed out.

GIOV: Is there a moral to this story?

ELEA: Perhaps in Dante, where we find Pier in the sixth ring of *The Inferno*. Well, life is hardly fair, Giovanna, and Aligheri's afterlife no better! Each of us is expendable, including an Emperor. Think on it! Frederick: King of the Romans, King of Sicily, Burgundy, Germany, and Italy. During the Sixth Crusade, he was also King of Jerusalem. But he was condemned at the Council of Lyon, where the Pope called him Antichrist. This is why Pier della Vigna lost his eyes. Pier had been entrusted with the Emperor's defense, but he delegated the matter to a less capable man, a jurist who failed, and so our Chancellor was assailed. *Respondeat superior* was the legal principle Frederick applied. What else should one expect from the World Shaker, *Stupor Mundi*? He of the balding red pate and myopic snake eyes, green, by reliable account. An historian says the Emperor would not have brought 200 drachmas, had he been sold as a slave. Yet he was Emperor, and had four wives: Constance of Aragon, Yolanda of Jerusalem – a marriage by proxy, through which Frederick came into *her* kingdom. After that, there was Isabella of England, a marriage arranged by said Pier della Vigna. And finally, Bianca of...

GIOV: Bianca!

ELEA: I thought that might bring us to the real matter at hand.

GIOV: Then you have supposed this subject consumes me?

ELEA: It colors your outlook, does it not? But soft!

[ENTER: FRANCESCO, in haste, carrying a crop]

GIOV: (Seeing him enter) Hail, my husband! How does, and where goes, Lord Francesco?

FRANC: “*Lord* Francesco”? How not “*my* Francesco”?

GIOV: (Curtseys) My lord Francesco, then.

FRANC: Ah, the spirit of true compromise!

ELEA: You are carrying a crop, my son. Does it signify?

FRANC: Signify? Oh, yes. Well, in a manner of speaking. I’m off to Bronzino’s studio. This crop is my prop.

ELEA: Another portrait? I hope it’s not meant for me. Three are quite enough. The walls are covered in damask because I like to see damask. So, it’s for...?

FRANC: Being a surprise, I cannot say for whom it is intended.

GIOV: (Hesitantly) Will Bronzino be painting my Lord in his *new white cape*?

FRANC: Hadn’t thought of that. (Snaps his fingers and points to the ceiling) Yes, perhaps he should do! A grand idea, my duchess, and I thank you for it!

ELEA: Then away to Bronzino, while the light is still good, unless you have something else to impart?

FRANC: In fact, I do. But I cannot, for the life of me, remember what it is.

ELEA: Then it must keep. (Extends her hand) Adieu, my son.

FRANC: (Kisses hand) Adieu, mother! Yourself, too, Giovanna. Fare thee well!

GIOV: (Curtseys, saying nothing)

[Exit: FRANCESCO]

ELEA: Well, there it is.

GIOV: Yes, there it is.

ELEA: I suppose I should speak with my youngest. Would you excuse me?

GIOV: As you will, Madam. Please convey my regards to Bishop Ferdinando.

ELEA: That's easily accomplished.

GIOV: I so very seldom see him! What so occupies our archbishop each day?

ELEA: Oh, he busies himself with the multifarious duties of any prince of the Church: elucidating Canon law, placing cannon, granting indulgences, and indulging past-times. He writes, you know. Most recently a treatise on certain plants found in the New World; in particular, *Drosera pygmaea*.

GIOV: Wait, I've heard of this. *Pygmy sundews*? Aren't they carnivorous?

ELEA: Bravo! Full marks!

GIOV: Perhaps I should read this treatise. Then he and I might converse together, when next we meet!

ELEA: I'm sure he would lend you the manuscript, cheerfully.

GIOV: Know you the title?

ELEA: In fact, I do. Translating from the Latin, it would be: "*Cannibalism Among Native Plants*." ¹³ We shall speak again soon, you and I.

GIOV: (Curtseys) Your servant, Madam.

[EXIT, ELEANOR; then GIOVANNA, in the opposite direction.]

Scene 5

(A well-lit room with two tables, one covered with books and papers, the other with a distillation apparatus, a burner, flasks, a sextant, a mounted magnifying lens, a compass and straight-edge, and a cluster of potted plants under a glass dome. Next the dome is a large glass jar, the mouth of which is covered with nainsook, secured by a knotted black ribbon. We see FERDINANDO lift, with his right hand, the glass dome away from the plants. His other hand holds forceps.)

[ENTER: ELEANOR, who moves unobtrusively toward the tables]

ELEA: (Examining the jar) You are raising mosquitoes, my son.

FERD: (Without looking up) Good morrow, Mother. Or is it afternoon? (Lowers the forceps to a plant) Those mosquitoes are mostly for this hungry beauty.

ELEA: Your Grace.

FERD: Indeed, Mother, these past two years.

ELEA: Have you still not given any thought at all to being ordained a priest?

FERD: Why should I? Was it I who wanted me for an archbishop? No, but rather my dear uncle, the Pope.

ELEA: He's here now. Have you seen him?

FERD: No.

ELEA: Yes. Well, you are sixteen years now, and a man. You will do as you please, I warrant.

FERD: Thank you, Mother... and with your archbishop's benediction! If you do not mind such an informal exercise of my esteemed estate.

ELEA: As your mother, I might welcome your sincere benediction.

FERD: How can it ever be sincere? I am unfit for canonicals. You know it. Everyone knows it. Why must I continue in these rented robes?

ELEA: Must someone explain your world to you?

FERD: Yes, I know. *Duty*. I know!

ELEA: Primogeniture, my son. Surely you must understand primogeniture by now?

FERD: Refresh my memory. No, better still: convince me of its necessity!

ELEA: To secure the family, Your Grace! If property is divided equally among heirs, soon there would be nothing remaining. All would be lost by the third generation, including our property, titles, standing and privileges. But with these come revenues, social standing, advantageous marriages, and plum appointments for members of the family. And with certain appointments come benefices, as Your Grace well knows. Have you not a sufficient income and leisure enough to indulge this passion for fly traps and monkey cups?

FERD: Monkeys cup?! Would that I had a specimen! They can digest small reptiles.

ELEA: You told me before that they dissolve small mammals.

FERD: Oh, that, too! But I've read they really prefer to eat our ancestors.

ELEA: That's not amusing, Ferdinando.

FERD: Oh, such wonderful names they have: *Nepenthes raja*. *Brachinia reducta*. *Darlingtonia californica*...

ELEA: Isn't that a village outside Ciudad de los Angeles?

FERD: If it is, then perhaps the cobra plant could have been named for it. In any case, I understand primogeniture quite well, thank you Mother. The eldest gets the lands and title; the second enough silver to make himself an officer; the third tries his hand in enterprise; the fourth becomes a priest, or better – one of those called forth by God, although few in the Vatican have a true vocation. We Medici and our rivals – the Colona, the Farnese, the Brunelleschi and Carafa, not to slight the Salviati and Spumoni – all of us, as you know, are the tide pool that produces bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and popes. *We* are the Church, and *we* protect our states religiously. Granted, we cannot get them to entirely coalesce, but we don't want some ambitious emperor doing it in our stead. So, yes, I have a role to play in our family's parlor games. I understand that, quite well. (Leaning over one of his plants, forceps in hand) Here, my *Darlingtonia*, have another mosquito. Don't forget to chew it the requisite number of times! (Turning to Eleanor) What did Hippocrates prescribe? I recall only the length for trimming one's toe nails.

ELEA: You're too clever for me, my son.

FERD: Hardly.

[ELEANOR again turns her attention to the jar]

ELEA: So, that's why you raise them. The mosquitoes, I mean.

FERD: As good as any other reason, don't you think?

ELEA: Whatever pleases you. My son. You are my favorite, you know.

FERD: Of course. Special affection for the youngest. The baby of the family.

ELEA: Tut-tut. (Abandoning the jar) I do want to express my admiration for your clear and insightful explication of primogeniture. Thank you for that.

FERD: That's the way things will stay, all day long. Unless...

ELEA: Unless what, my son?

FERD: Unless... circumstances change.

ELEA: See you a change on the horizon? Do we mean our guest from Venice? You and she are the same age.

FERD: My brother is not so much older. Besides, being of the Church, I cannot marry. Theoretically. So why would I think on it?

ELEA: I'm sure I cannot say. But, the fact remains, you have not been ordained a priest. Your uncle merely made you archbishop. As always, flexibility is the watchword of Pius IV.

FERD: (Abruptly) How goes it with my sister-in-law?

ELEA: Well enough. Giovanna is Giovanna. Why do you ask?

FERD: I'm sure I cannot say. But, the fact remains, she has only been married a year, or something little more, and already she has a rival.

ELEA: Ah, so we *are* discussing our Venetian guest, after all.

FERD: Have you another topic of equal interest?

ELEA: Pass. Tell me, what do you think of her?

FERD: There's no fairer flower between Venice and Aleppo.

ELEA: Yes, but does it eat mosquitoes?

FRED: Pass. Do you know, Mother, that, in my considerable boredom, I have devised a new board game? I call it "Cappello Chess".¹⁴ Play begins with gambits. There are two new pieces: one combining the moves of a bishop and a banker; the other a bishop and an assassin. The board is still eight squares deep, but the width stretches across northern Italy.

ELEA: You are remarkably well informed. Has the Duke taken his youngest into his confidence? Or have you spies of your own?

FERD: During confession, I absolved one of yours. You'll want to know his penance, surely: Our Father, once; Hail Mary, twice; and three little acts of charity.

ELEA: Oh, what a proud mother am I. You really *are* my son.

FERD: Speaking of questions of legitimacy...

ELEA: You mean Francesco.

FERD: It is you who are too clever for me, Mother.

ELEA: What else should I do with my considerable boredom, except have a care for my boys? And consider the intrigues of the palace.

FERD: Then you have already thought what I am thinking.

ELEA: Yes, I think so. You and I have only today begun thinking of what might be the consequence of Francesco fathering another bastard.

FERD: And a legitimate heir, all at once. Giovanna wants to furnish him with a son, to cement her...

ELEA: Yes, of course she does.

FERD: And how long do you think this Venetian vixen will hold out? In truth, Francesco need only snap his fingers to get what he wants.

ELEA: But Duke Cosimo is still the stage manager here in Palazzo Medici. Francesco must have his father's approval. Or, at least, acquiescence.

FERD: He could take her to his estate in Tuscany.

ELEA: He could do, but I think he will not. Francesco's various affairs keep him too much in the city.

FERD: Whether Francesco installs her here or there, the potentialities remain the same, do you not agree, Mother.

ELEA: Yes, yes. Francesco need only acknowledge a bastard to make him an heir. Then, Giovanna. Her son, when she has one, will have a rival. And Bianca Cappello. Of course, who can say whether either infant would survive infancy? Besides, it could be daughters, and not sons.

FERD: I think it will play as with Ippolito, all over again.

ELEA: You've been reading our family's historian, Master Machiavelli. Too bad he is no longer among us. We might seek his advice. Don't tell me that you are seeing yourself as another Ippolito de Medici?

FERD: No, I am only an archbishop. Tell me, Mother, with the evidence being so equivocal: do you believe Ippolito was poisoned by Alessandro, or by Paul III? If the latter, the Pope's object would obviously have been to effect the transfer of Ippolito's rather lucrative benefices to a member of the Farnese family – which is precisely what happened.

ELEA: Yes, the Pope entrusted them to his nephew. Just so. But, what I wonder is whether Alessandro and the Pope acted in concert. I suppose you're thinking that's my suspicious nature for you.

FERD: (Again feeding his plant with forceps) Nature is everywhere suspicious, Mother.

ELEA: Hm. I'll have to think on that a bit. For now, it's growing late. I should leave you to your darling Darlingtonia.

FERD: If it please you, Mother. I've enjoyed our little chat.

ELEA: (Nods, and departs. In passing, she pings her middle index against the glass jar.)

[EXIT]

[FERDINANDO remains absorbed with his plants and the objects upon the table.]

[LIGHTS, gradually down.]

{End of Act Three}

ACT FOUR

Scene 1

(Morning in the kitchen of Palazzo Medici, where members of the household staff are rousing themselves in preparation for the evening's festivities. At a large table, a BAKER kneads dough, while COOK 1 plucks a goose, COOK 2 shells peas, and COOK 3 washes vegetables in a basin. At the same time, a MAID is trying to mop under their feet. NOTE: This being the 16th century, it is understood that cooks and maids are women, while bakers and chefs are men, following the natural order. Meanwhile, as one final clarification, assistants are often androgynous by design.)

[TEMPO is early morning slow, and half a beat off. Maybe more.]

[Offstage: a rooster crows]

COOK 1: Hear that? Up early, he is. It's still dark out.

[The MAID mops around the BAKER's feet.]

BAKER: Not now. Our efforts lack coordination. (Calling to an ASSISTANT)
Where's my coffee? Look lively!

ASSIST [offstage]: Coming!

COOK 1: (To the Baker) You shouldn't be poaching! Maybe an egg, but not Duke Cosimo's brandy or his venison – and especially not his coffee! You'll be found out!

BAKER: Not if you pipe down! (Slams the dough) If Duke Cosimo wants me baking all day and all night, then he won't mind me keeping my eyes open.

[ENTER: ASSISTANT, with a small bowl in hand]

ASSIST: Here you are. One double-shot café latte, with a dollop of whipped cream, topped by a sprinkling of cinnamon, and garnished with a sprig of mint!

BAKER: What?

ASSIST: It's just a jest.

BAKER: It had better be, Starbuccio. How are the gelatos?

ASSIST: Jelling nicely

BAKER: Good! (Tastes his coffee) Well? Want me to applaud? Get to work!

[EXIT: ASSISTANT]

MAID: (To whomever) Move yer feet.

COOK 2: (To anyone who will listen) It would have to be this morning, wouldn't it, for Chef Alessandro to come down with a fever, and him leaving us with the baker in charge!

BAKER: Shell your peas and mind your Qs.

COOK 2: Ps and Qs? (To Cook 3) Get him! A little power in his hands and...

COOK 3: Like Chef himself!

BAKER: Well, you know, power corrupts posabsitivolutely. (Drains his coffee)

COOK 1: Pipe down, Baker! Before someone overhears your learn'ed discourse and spins it for You Know Who!

BAKER: Too true! All right now, back at it!

MAID: (To whomever) Move yer feet.

COOK 3: (Sagely) Oh, they're all sleeping still, no doubt, so to look fresh for the big doings tonight. How many is it?

BAKER: For the dinner table, eight. But in the ballroom, the Finest Fifty of Fair Florence. In their finery!

COOK 2: (Emphatically) F-f-f-f-f. Now there's a hot wind.

COOK 3: A trade wind, you mean. Every big merchant and banker in the city! Promenading. That's the word, isn't it?

MAID: (To whomever) Move yer feet.

COOK 2: They'll be wearing masks, I hear. Masks from Venice!

COOK 1: Oh, my! Lord Francesco is so very, very subtle!

COOK 2: Isn't he just! (Matter of fact) It's for her, all right.

COOK 3: She's expecting, someone said. Doesn't show, though.

BAKER: How do you know this?

COOK 3: How? Come now. Chamber maids are invisible – unless Master Pietro takes a fancy to one of them!

COOK 2: Pietro! The little bantam! His pecker is everywhere. He's having the run of the house!

BAKER: Just compensation! (Aside) Lucky lad!

COOK 1: Leave it to a man to think like that!

BAKER: But his wife's been taken from him!

COOK 3: What's that to the chamber maids?

COOK 1: That's right. Such is their sorry lot! Stop-offs between the silk sheets and the two-penny uprights!

ASSIST: (Poking his head into the room) My Lord wasted no time forestalling *him*, before installing *her*! Some sort of *arrangement*, or so everyone says!

MAID: (To whomever) Move yer feet.

BAKER: Ah, the *triangulo equilatero*. In French, *ménage à trois*.

COOK 1: Well, aren't you the Cosimo politan! Er, Cosmo...

COOK 3: Cosmopolitan, dear. And, too, the Duchess has a bun in the oven!

COOK 1: The Duchess?!

BAKER: Giovanna?

COOK 3: Who else would it be? Not Dame Eleanor, not at this late date.

BAKER: Ah, Duke Francesco! Admirable fellow!

MAID: (Leans on her mop) She's been heavin'.

COOK 2: Ain't that the truth. Can't keep an egg down.

COOK 3: Morning sickness, these past nine days.

[EXIT: MAID]

BAKER: Nine? Not eight or ten?

COOK 3: Yester morn makes nine, exactly. No one expects a baker to be precise, except when counting out a baker's dozen.

COOK 2: And Lady Bianca, too, you say!

COOK 3: I do say!

COOK 1: Then that explains it, then! That explains it!

BAKER: *That explains what?*

COOK 1: The bridge!

BAKER: What do you mean, the bridge? What bridge?

COOK 1: Why, the Santa Trinita, that's what bridge!

COOK 3: You know, the one Michelangelo designed for Duke Cosimo!

BAKER: Yes, yes! What about the Santa Trinita?

COOK 1: Giovanna and Lady Bianca had a tussle on that bridge, they did, unless it was the Ponte Nuovo, I always forget, but it happened when they were passing! Giovanna tried to push her into the Arno!

COOK 3: Did she?! Did she really?

BAKER: If that's true, then it was probably not your Santa Trinita nor the Ponte Nuovo.

COOK 1: Oh, yeah? Where then?

BAKER: From Vassari's secret passage between the Pitti Palace and the Plaza Vecchio. I mean, they wouldn't be traipsing about in public, would they?

COOK 1: Secret passage? How do you know something about something like that?

BAKER: How do you know there was any tussle on a bridge, in the first place?

COOK 1: Because I know!

BAKER: How do you know?

COOK 1: People talk, don't they?

COOK 2: Don't they just!

COOK 3: And where there's fire...

BAKER: There's usually a smoke screen!

COOK 2: Smoke screen? Get him!

[A moment passes]

BAKER: C'mon... (slams the dough) Heads and hearts to it!

[EVERYONE hushes, intent upon their work]

[ENTER: ASSISTANT]

ASSIST: More coffee?

BAKER: (Shakes head) Nah. (Slams dough)

[EXIT: ASSISTANT]

[Everyone working. A moment passes]

COOK 1: Imagine that! The two of 'em with buns in the oven!

BAKER: C'mon! (Slams dough)

[Everyone working]

COOK 3: They'll scratch each other's eyes out, before it's over!

BAKER: (Slams dough) All right, already!

COOK 2: Get him!

[LIGHTS down]

[A rooster crows]

[SHORT INTERMEZZO, with music.]

Scene 2

(That evening. A dining room in Palazzo Medici.)

[Seated clockwise around a long table, we see Grand Duke COSIMO at the head, then FRANCESCO, BIANCA, FERDINANDO, with Grand Dame ELEANOR at the end; on her left: GIOVANNA, CARDINAL de Medici, and the EMISSARY of Venice.]
[Eight SERVANTS stand attention.]

CARD: (Belches) Pardon me.

COSIMO: (Belches) Pardon me! (Sips wine) Most embarrassing.

CARD: Excellent foie gras!

[A door opens. Through the open door wafts faint music from down the passageway.

ENTER: a ninth SERVANT, who approaches ELEANOR]

SERV 9: (Whispers into Eleanor's ear, then stands attention to one side.)

ELEA: Your guests are arriving, Cosimo

COSIMO: Then all goes to plan. Such a rare conjunction of itinerant stars.

CARD: Ho! You're unusually astrophysical tonight. Or do I mean to say 'astrological'?

ELEA: They treat of the same subject matter, though one be physical and the other logical.

COSIMO: Not quite. You forget Aristarchus and Master Copernicus.

CARD: (Sighs heavily) Trent has ended, finally, and without discussion. Damned Dominicans. Bartolomeo Spina! And his disciple, Tolosani, is here, in Florence!

COSIMO: Indeed he is. Tell me: why did the Council skirt the question?

CARD: Well, everything has been delicious! An excellent meal! But, are we to suppose that this is an entirely informal affair, just family and pleasant company

(nods to the Venetian emissary; then to Bianca), or is there some imminent announcement pending? Dare I ask, brother?

COSIMO: Yes, it is so: there is a reason for this modest repast, and there is a little something to say, before we retire to the revel and gaiety engulfs us.

ELEA: Oh, do try to contain your enthusiasm, my Lord.

COSIMO: But I am, in my own way, enthusiastic of the enterprise that occasions this evening's festivities. So many conditions combine to further such an enterprise, there is no time so favorable to it as this present moment. I mean to step down.

[General surprise.]

FERD: I see this announcement seems to come as a surprise to everyone except you, Mother.

ELEA: You forget, my son, that your father is my husband.

[ALL laugh]

FERD: No secrets, then. Stupid of me to dream otherwise. My apologies. (To Cosimo) You cannot mean that, Father. Can that really be your intention?

COSIMO: What I intend is to tend your mother's rosebushes. Morning coffee on the veranda, siestas in the afternoon. Early to rise, and early to bed, looks well in my eyes, enough said.

EMISS: Then an almanac of auspicious days to you!

FRANC: But to deprive Florence of your sagacity is surely unjust, Father! Her fortunes may run amok, if you drop the reins!

CARD: (Raising a glass) Well said, Nephew!

COSIMO: Francesco, my son. That action is just which is necessary. It is time to step down. I am weary of chicanery and tired of vicissitude. Such is the ship of state, and one becomes too old to be tossed on seas of circumstance.

CARD: (Aside) Or dry-docked in a desert, with the reins dropped. Isn't language a wonder?

FRANC: But the wheel is still rising to the zenith!

COSIMO: (Considers that, then shakes his head) And thence to the azimuth! No, my son. Fortune is a woman who favors young sailors, fierce and unscrupulous.

CARD: (Carried away) Yes, for what are scruples but encrustation, the barnacles that weigh down a maritime republic, slow the galleys of commerce, and sink the unconscionable slavers?

COSIMO: (Turning to the Emissary) By which His Grace means to say, the Spanish caravels.

CARD: Yes. That's what I meant. No offense intended, Excellency.

EMISS: None taken, Your Grace. The ship of state is a favorite metaphor among us Venetians.

COSIMO: (Turning to Francesco) What more is there to say? The temper of the times either accords, or does not accord, with best-laid plans. Mine is to tend roses. Time shall prove whether Florence flourishes without me, and no doubt she will. (Looks slowly around the table) All of you will attest that I am a man of affairs. Some might add 'a man without poetry'. But a trader once presented me a hanging scroll, an ink painting with Japanese characters from north to south, and he told me what it said, as I will tell you now: *I've always known this day would come / But I didn't know, yesterday, it would be today.*¹⁵ I remember that scroll, and especially tonight, for the day has come to make an arrangement, ere I make my way to Villa di Castello.

CARD: So, it's to be Villa di Castello. You belong to another age, Duke Cosimo! A noble Roman you would have made, departing public life to retire to an estate.

COSIMO: Roman or no, there you will find me.

CARD: But what of this arrangement you mention?

COSIMO: A simple matter. As I step down, someone must step up.

EMISS: Of course, a successor! By a vote of the Signory, as with the Council in Venice?

COSIMO: By appointment, perhaps, ratified by a show of hands.

EMISS: Then, like the Cosimo before you, all matters are settled in this house. Peace, war... even the ransoms of popes! Well, we all know the proverb!

FERD: *"The one with the gold makes the rules"?*

EMISS: I was thinking of another.

COSIMO: (Shrugs) Bankers are bankers. Do not those of Venice lend to princes and principalities, as well as to architects, clerics, tradesmen, and merchants?

EMISS: Some are less scrupulous than Your Highness. The speculating Salviati can buy a crop in its entirety, then wait for scarcity to pump the price.

COSIMO: But a prince might do as much; or, a consortium of merchants, acting in concert. Please! For tonight, enough of this. It is time for the Duke of Tuscany to steer Florence into the future.

FRANC: What? I, Father?

COSIMO: You, Francesco.

GIOV: Admiral Francesco, then. You expected otherwise, my husband?

ELEA: Admirable! (Placing her hand upon Giovanna's) Tsk!

CARD: Well, well. Blessings, Nephew, and all best wishes.

[FRANCESCO looks at BIANCA, who is beaming]

COSIMO: Yes, our best good wishes. A formal announcement tomorrow, and an opportunity for any who might oppose this appointment to show cause. After which, the matter will be decided in the Senate.

FERD: As is proper, to a republic; and Florence is a republic, whose Senate will surely see – nay, can only see the appointee's merit. Who, then, would refuse him obedience? What jealousy would stand in the way? What mean-spiritedness? Men will follow a standard, in fact any standard, were there only someone to raise one; and Tuscany is the standard, I'll wager my ordination and canonicals.

ELEA: Yet you remain not ordained, my son.

FERD: Then my canonicals, solely.

FRANC: But not your immortal soul, we hope! There's no need to take matters so far! We believe you, brother, and thank you sincerely. What say you, Bianca?

[THEY speak into each other's ears]

COSIMO: [Claps his hands] Good! 'Tis done then, excepting the actual doing.

CARD: Whatever remains to be done, shall be done, in order not to deprive the citizenry of their voice, nor the exercise of their express will.

FERD: Nor their free will, Uncle, as God will not do everything himself. Where the disposition is strong, the difficulty cannot be great.

CARD: I am unsure that I am following you, Nephew.

FERD: Not to fret, Uncle, for I am following you!

COSIMO: (To the Emissary) A small imposition, Excellency. Would you be so kind as to exchange chairs with the Cardinal?

EMISS: Willingly! For then I might speak with the Duchess!

GIOV: (Aside) Saints!

COSIMO: Your Grace?

CARD: What is it Cosimo?

COSSIMO: A word! Francesco?

[COSIMO, CARDINAL, and FRANCESCO convene together, closing themselves off]

[The EMISSARY engages GIOVANNA; and BIANCA fiddles with her bracelets.]

FERD: When we spoke, you said nothing, Mother.

ELEA: That is because one might solve variables and balance equations for oneself. You can calculate. Do the math!

FERD: Meaning such matters as lead to the end a man sees before him: position, wealth and glory. Depending on the vicissitudes of Fortune, for tonight we see who Fortune favors. Methinks, Mother, that Fortune is a woman who, to be kept at all, must be roughly treated; for she will be mastered more readily by rough treatment than by timidity.

ELEA: Say you and Master Niccolo.

FERD: And you, mother? What say you?

ELEA: Estoy de acuerdo. Fortune ever spreads her legs in the face of audacity.

FERD: Better, then, to be impetuous, than over-cautious.

[The three-man convention breaks up, with COSIMO offering a final word]

COSIMO: (To Francesco) ...and for that reason nothing confers such honor as do new laws and institutions.

CARD: Francesco the Reformer!

FRANC: I'll bear that in mind!

CARD: Splendid!

COSIMO: (Raising a glass) A toast to the Duke of Tuscany! Now Grand Duke!

CARD: Yes! A toast to our new Grand Duke! Health to you, and prosperity to your city!

COSIMO: To Duke Francesco!

ALL: To Duke Francesco!

[THEY drink. Almost immediately, COSIMO begins to choke. He coughs violently and collapses into his chair, looks blearily about, then drops his head upon his arms atop the table. He is motionless.]

[No one budes. However, they do look from side to side at one another. A moment passes. Then, COSIMO rights himself slowly and smiles.]

COSIMO: (To Francesco) Went down the wrong pipe. But, see the waters one must swim in?

ELEA: Bad acting has never fooled anyone, Husband.

EMISS: Fooled me!

CARD: Terrible performance, my brother! God awful!

[ALL laugh, especially COSIMO]

COSIMO: Well... No harm done! Is there? Forgive me. Now and again I must have my little joke.

ELEA: Really, Cosimo! I do wonder about you, at times!

GIOV: (Moves away from the table) Would you excuse me, please? I have a headache.

FERD: (Gallantly) I'll see you to your chamber.

[EXEUNT: GIOVANNA and FERDINANDO, hurriedly]

[ALL look from side to side at one another]

FRANC: Lately, the Duchess is disposed to being indisposed. (Raises his glass) Here's a health to Duke Cosimo! (Drinks)

COSIMO: No, no. (Raising his hand) That's hardly necessary!

FRANC: Away then! (Wipes his mouth on his sleeve) Let us don our masks and join the revel!

ELEA: (To Cardinal) Has Your Grace settled upon an incognito?

CARD: I am going as a Cardinal, am I not?

ELEA: Indeed you are, my pious Pius!

EMISS: Pius? Pius IV? No! The Pope is in Rome, is he not? I mean, there are so many prelates among you Medici, that I... Oh, fool that I am!

CARD: Now, now. Like Cosimo, now and again I must have my little joke.

EMISS: Gads! What was the Doge thinking, to send me here? I am inexperienced in diplomacy. This is my first mission! Am I on a fool's errand?

CARD: Probably. But to suspect such makes one less a fool, if indeed one was a fool at the outset. In any case, we all gain from experience.

EMISS: You are kind, Your Grace. I mean, Holy Father.

CARD: Yes, well, one might say I try to give that impression.

[Ignoring everyone, FRANCESCO takes BIANCA by the hand]

FRANC: Come away, fair lady!

ELEA: (Taking COSIMO by the arm) You, too, old man.

[EXEUNT, ALL]

[SHORT INTERMEZZO, with music.]

Scene 3

(Night. The ballroom.)

[NOTE on staging: Constellations of MASKERS weave onstage and off, in and out from the wings. They pose temporarily and move on. Their **ambient chatter** is a tape-loop of voices enough to register as The Finest Fifty of Florence. Other MASKERS dance continuously unless */STOPPED/*. Then, movement and chatter cease altogether, so to provide an aural and visual space for dialogue. Nevertheless, **music** continues unobtrusively throughout dialogues. During dialogues, **lighting** is low except for the **spotlight(s)** upon speakers, who lower masks. When a dialogue concludes, the **lighting** returns to a golden mean in the same instant that movements and chatter */CONTINUE/* simultaneously; and so forth and so on, throughout. Finally, the movements of ALL maskers require choreography that will carry over into Act 5, Scene 5.]

[MUSIC down.]

[The MASKERS are in their positions, but motionless, as though frozen in time.]

[ENTER: COSIMO and ELEANOR, FRANCESCO and BIANCA, the EMISSARY and
CARDINAL de Medici]

[MUSIC up. ALL MASKERS begin to move. Dancing commences with an allemande, followed by a minuet.]

[ENTER, GIOVANNA and FERDINANDO]

/STOPPED/

[Spotlight on]

GIOV: I hate fêtes and galas. Masques serve only to underscore the artificiality.

FERD: Oh, but Giovanna: Here, one sees humankind in its element and wearing
its true face.

[Spotlight off]

/CONTINUES/

[Nodding to this person and to that, they pass the rank and file of dancing MASKERS,
as other MASKERS move in and out from the wings]

[ELEANOR sees them and draws near. FERDINANDO moves away]

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

ELEA: Ah, good! You are feeling better then, Giovanna?

GIOV: Yes, a little better, thank you. Ferdinando suggested an herbal remedy.

ELEA: Ah. One of his arcane concoctions of efficacious effect. I am happy to hear it. It is important to be present this evening. Best not to leave the field, or one might surrender ground and strategic position. Not that one is in the midst of a skirmish. (Moving away) More like maneuvers, I should think.

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[To one side, two MASKERS notice FERDINANDO moving through the crowd]

MASKER 1: Look! It's Ferdinando!

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

MASKER 2: What? The archbishop? *Here*, and not in his study, looking for some way to cross a dog and a cat?

MASKER 1: Why no, he'd as soon cross a man with a pig and make the homunculus King of Cats!

MASKER 2: *And* Top Dog!

MASKER 1: Too true!

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[In the foreground, FRANCESCO and BIANCA dance an intimately close minuet.]

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

BIANCA: As in everything, my Lord dances exceeding well.

FRANC: Cuts a fine figure on the floor, they say?

BIANCA: The noblest. The handsomest man in the room.

FRANC: In this narrow brick of a box!? What say you?

BIANCA: I am serious, yet you mock me! Why so?

FRANC: No. No mockery. 'Tis my bent to distrust compliments.

BIANCA: I paid you no compliment, Francesco. I simply stated a fact.

FRANC: As do I, Bianca. Your beauty shames the Graces. And Velasquez will paint it so, when he makes you thrice over his *Venus*. For now, Bronzino...

BIANCA: Weighs me down with diamonds, rubies, amethysts, and pearls.

FRANC: Deserve you less? I could still do more! Why, Fra Pandolf...¹⁶

BIANCA: But I do not ask it. These flights of fancy. I do not ask it.

FRANC: Then whatever pleases you, Bianca. But first, what troubles you?

BIANCA: Who am I, Francesco, and what might one say, while you bed your Giovanna?

FRANC: As wife, is all. An arrangement of state. Giovanna does not have my heart.

BIANCA: Yet still she has you, key in lock, while a concubine carries your child.

FRANC: A son? By all the saints! If 'tis so, that you are...?

BIANCA: I am.

[FRANCESCO takes BIANCA's hand]

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[FRANCESCO and BIANCA dance]

[Away, the CARDINAL notices FERDINANDO]

CARD: (Motioning to him) Nephew!

FERD: (Stops in his tracks) Uncle.

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

CARD: Can it be? Have I lived long enough to see my nephew put aside treatises and formulas for half an hour's merriment?

FERD: I've come to make my Tridentine Profession.¹⁷ I believe your formulation should be made publicly.

CARD: Oh, that! Time and place, Nephew! This is hardly the time *or* the place.

FERD: Health, good Uncle, if you'll excuse me. My mother...

CARD: By all means.

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[FERDINANDO finds ELEANOR]

FERD: Mother! (He takes her arm, pulling her to one side)

ELEA: What now? Is something amiss?

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

FERD: (Indicating direction by a nod of his head) Look at her!

ELEA: Who, Bianca?

FERD: Comporting herself as if *she* were the Duchess. No pretense at all! And my brazen brother cares not a whit for Giovanna among this august company. What do you make of it, Mother?

ELEA: As always, your brother is amusing; but as for the object of his affections, I understand her humor not at all.

FERD: She can be a little broad.¹⁸

ELEA: Tsk!

[Spot off, then immediately:]

[Spot on]

EMISS: What of that mad monk, Savonarola? How did he come to hold such sway over this enlightened city?

COSIMO: You know the people. Sometimes they discern glimmerings in this man or that, and so their conjecture becomes that he is ordained by God. Yet, afterwards, in the further course of actions and events, it can be seen that Fortune – or God, or even the Devil, if you prefer – has disowned him. However, you should not think that Savonarola was mad.

EMISS: Then what gave rise to his seeming mad actions?

COSIMO: The logic of his assumptions, pushed to an extreme. He sought purity, and there is no end to that. Nor can a fever pitch be maintained indefinitely.

EMISS: People had enough, finally, and sent him to the stake?

COSIMO: The only way for a satiated mob to end the search for scapegoats.

EMISS: Scapegoats. Do you think it is an inevitable cycle?

COSIMO: (Shrugs) Who knows? It's a cycle, certainly. I do not know whether it is inevitable.

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[Two MASKERS, in passing]

MASKER 1: How Lady Bianca plays the Duchess!

MASKER 2: *He saw, They came, She conquered.*¹⁹

MASKER 1: Something like that.

[ENTER: PIETRO and libation, *ad libitum*. His mask is atop his head, his gait is on deck, and a flask is in hand, but he is not sloppy drunk. He navigates the dancers, then drops anchor.]

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

FRANC: (Seeing him) Is he sloshed?

BIANCA: Who?

FRANC: Your husband, Madam, and my clerk. (Nodding) There.

BIANCA: Oh, God. I hate when he's like this. If called upon, he might well sing a shanty or recite some heroic couplet – even solve all problems, foreign and domestic.

FRANC: Methinks he may do that before being called upon!

[Spot off, then immediately:]

[Spot on, at the opposite side of the ballroom]

MASKER 3: Ah, life is sweet!

PIETRO: (Voce mezza canto) “*What the world needs now is...*” ²⁰

MASKER 3: Another marvelous evening! Sweet wine, sweet music, sweet women!

PIETRO: (Inebriated) You know, my newest of new friends, whenever life offers something sweet, I cannot help thinking ‘*All right, so this is the day I get snuffed*’.

MASKER 3: How fatalistic! You'll spoil the evening. Enjoy! Look around!

PIETRO: Already enough eyes are looking around. And reporting what they see! Here, there, everywhere! In the plaza, the marketplace, across the bridges, and along the alleyways. We report on the people reporting on us, like so many birds on a wire. And to whose benefit all this twittering?

MASKER 3: I suppose princes and moneylenders must stay informed.

PIETRO: Tyrants, too. But I digress.

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[As music and dancing continue, COSIMO, ELEANOR, FERDINANDO, GIOVANNA, the CARDINAL and the EMISSARY gradually and inconspicuously slip away.]

[EXEUNT]

[PIETRO progresses toward FRANCESCO and BIANCA]

/STOPPED/

[Spot on]

FRANC: Pietro! Welcome! And how are we on this fine evening?

PIETRO: Tops! Couldn't be better! Yet sore at pains to draw breath enough to tell my story; which is to say: sing a saga, tell a tale, and/or relate a history.

FRANC: An importunity. Another night, Pietro. No history for me, if you will.

PIETRO: I will not, then. Rather, I'll lodge a complaint. But first condescend, good Duke, to forgive such an imposition.

FRANC: Forgiven. Now. What is it?

PIETRO: Can you not guess the complaint? A small claim, admittedly.

FRANC: What possible complaint? You were a clerk at Salviati. Now you've a sinecure in a palace. You may prance with pantry maids as you please.

PIETRO: (Insistent) I would have a word with my wife. (To Bianca) You loved me once. You did! You loved *me*.

BIANCA: I was never yours, truly, except by deception and dissimulation.

PIETRO: Oh, surely! Dissimulation dissembles all semblance of true simulation, however insignificant the signification signifying. Ah, what incandescence of transcendent trumpery! And here, tonight, we don all trumpery! ²¹

BIANCA: You're drunk. And you've been thumbing a thesaurus.

PIETRO: How now? Better to shuffle through life with a lexicon of three hundred?

BIANCA: Enough for a drunk to converse with a dog!

PIETRO: Or to translate Dante into doggerel!

BIANCA: You're drunk, I say. Let's *not* talk tonight.

PIETRO: Oh, tonight of all nights, a mere word and a moment on the floor.

BIANCO: I do not care to dance, thank you. You're drunk.

PIETRO: Dance? I meant a session of congress!

FRANC: In a charterhouse! ²² Away! Hie thee!

BIANCA: Give it up, Pietro!

PIETRO: Tithe-ingly, for who does not give all he has, to be your Lord's disciple.

FRANC: Dissipated dog! What have you that you have not received? And if you have received it, how dare you strut about as though you have not? In your cups, and foul of breath!

PIETRO: Indeed. Behold, the tail-wagger! I lap your liquor in fine spirit, however my breathiness may rankle; yet it is no mere dissipated exhalation! For the Spirit says: *All that I have is yours* – just as all that *you* have is yours, 'cause God knows you've earned it! Merciful heaven, all of it, by the sun-blistered sweaty brow of *somebody somewhere!* Oh, did I forget to mention the perseverance and pluck of the *pluck*-hold whose *fuck*-hold makes a cuckold of me! (Aside) Oh, that's rather good... (To Bianca) Have you a pen and paper on your person?

FRANC: You insolent earthworm! Who do you think you are? You're a nobody with no place in the world! Ridiculous word-slinger! Think you belong in this company? Look at you! You've no ruffles, lace, refinements, grace! Of these adornments, not a trace.

PIETRO: My adornment clings to your sleeve, Your Vertiginous Altitude. Thou summit of small-minded pusillanimous foppery!

FRANC: Basta! (Going to his rapier) Draw!

[BIANCA backs away, covering her mouth with her hand]

PIETRO: (Goes to draw his sword, only he has none) Five cards, if you please.

FRANC: (Sheathing) Fool! Jumped-up upstart!

[BIANCA pulls farther away]

[FRANCESCO makes a sign to a nearby GUARD, who takes PIETRO forcefully by the arm as a SECOND GUARD advances quickly to take his other arm.]

FRANC: Kindly see this *gentleman*... home.

GUARDS: (Both together) Sir! (They pull Pietro away)

PIETRO: (Straining over his shoulder) Bianca!

[ALL MASKERS begin to move and to gossip]

FRANC: (Loudly) Friends! (Louder) Friends! Apologies for the disruption! This gentle night of celebration drives some to slosh in inebriation! Absurdity, then, tips the balance. Moderation in all things, lest we be brutish or prudish, and lose our golden mean! That being said, and with much yet to do, drink up! Cheers to all! Play on! A divertimento!

[Spot off]

/CONTINUES/

[EXEUNT, FRANCESCO and BIANCA]

[The MASKERS continue to dance, the LIGHTS go gradually down. One by one, each masker disappears into the wings, until all are gone. Then, the music fades to nothing.]

[EXEUNT ALL]

{End of Act Four}

ACT FIVE

Scene 1

(Late morning. A courtyard of the Medici Palace.)

[COSIMO and ELEANOR are sitting on a stone bench]

ELEA: You slept badly last night.

COSIMO: As did you.

ELEA: Because of you.

COSIMO: I know.

ELEA: You are always thus, before a journey. I would guess retirement rests heavily upon your shoulders. Can tending roses really be enough for you?

COSIMO: Easier to trim rambling roses than to tie and train a thorny republic.

ELEA: Do you mean confirmation in the Signory?

COSIMO: Done. Passed. Accomplished. Your son is now Grand Duke.

ELEA: Then rest easy, my Lord, for you are his tutor – and he, an apt pupil. He will not disappoint.

COSIMO: (Looks down at his hands, resting upon his knees) No.

ELEA: What is it? What troubles you? I see some consternation furrows your brow. A report? A false report?

COSIMO: Would that it were some calumny. (Rises from the bench and begins to pace) Young Buonaventuri, the unwanted son-in-law of Bartolomeo Cappello.

ELEA: Yes, yes. Bianca's spouse. Why this circumlocution?

COSIMO: He was found floating face down in the Arno.

[ELEANOR rises slowly from the bench]

ELEA: That's who, what, and where. When, then? And why, if you can tell me.

COSIMO: Sunrise this morning. I can only guess why.

ELEA: Oh, the long arm of Venice! Mayhaps.

COSIMO: Yes, perhaps. Perhaps not. He was drunk. I hear he offended Francesco between a gavotte and a gigue.

ELEA: In front of everyone, then. Everyone who's anyone.

COSIMO: Yes. A farce. An ill-advised word. Then words upon words.

ELEA: And so, a flare-up. Francesco exploded?

COSIMO: Before the fireworks, which became redundant.

ELEA: Husband, I think I am glad we departed early. This is no memory to carry to Villa di Castello.

COSIMO: What to make of it? Such unpleasantness belongs to the street, not the ballroom. It does not auger well. Are we losing some sense of things?

[ELEANOR reseats herself]

ELEA: Giuliano and Lorenzo were attacked coming from the church.

COSIMO: Yes, but outside. Not inside, while praying.

ELEA: Inside or outside. I suppose it matters little where a Pazzi hangs.²³ Outside, if the grievance is public. Inside, if private.

COSIMO: No bounds. No bounds or boundaries. This is not for me, this world of novel normalcy.

ELEA: *Normalcies*, my husband, in an endless escort. Francesco seems to understand it. He can move in it. He is capable. He will plot a course. Now, it is his turn to steer the state.

[COSIMO sits beside her, closer than before]

COSIMO: That metaphor, again. And why not? Perhaps he has his bearings and can navigate such waters – up and down, North and South. But no East and West. No longitudes. Only attitudes.²⁴ (Shakes his head)

ELEA: This is the city of rebirth. Things progress, and Francesco will navigate with new charts.

COSIMO: Mm. I hear what you mean, I think. We are too old for new birth.

ELEA: There it is. Let it go. (Sighs) Leave it be.

COSIMO: (Nods) Just so.

ELEA: Yet one wishes our villa were high on a hill, above all machinations.

COSIMO: They would fly to find us, Wife – and now we're mixing metaphors.

ELEA: Oh, for an island with sea walls.

COSIMO: Ah. A sanctuary. And a prison.

[ENTER: FRANCESCO, leading BIANCA by the hand]

FRANC: (Heartily) Mater! Pater! Good morning! Here you are, both! We are surprised to see you, yet pleased to see you, before your departure from Florence.

ELEA: Good morning, my son. (Perfunctorily) Bianca.

[BIANCA curtseys]

ELEA: Your father is going; I am staying. When Villa di Castello is ship-shape, he will send for me. All the more to please. Now, why are you surprised?

FRANC: Father's usual early starts, in every enterprise.

COSIMO: A few minor details to attend this morning. Your election, for one.

FRANC: You have been to the Signory?

COSIMO: I have. Your appointment is confirmed, Grand Duke Francesco.

BIANCA: So soon? This is nothing like Venice. The Grand Council can deliberate for days.

ELEA: As can the Vatican, 'til the archangel's last trump. But Florence moves faster, especially in matters that require little to no debate.

FRANC: Never too many of those! Efficiency, you see, Bianca. Our republic is run like a business.

BIANCA: My father says the business of government *is* business. In another mood, it's arts and sciences. He confuses me.

COSIMO: It is both, on balance, wherever ledgers can be balanced.

BIANCA: And where they cannot, rules the despot? I've been reading Machiavelli.

COSIMO: Is that so? I do not recall Master Niccolo saying so.

FRANC: As I've told you, Bianca, read him carefully. He sometimes means the opposite of what he seems to say. Or so I read him.

COSIMO & ELEA: (Nodding) Hmm.

[ENTER: the CHARGE d'AFFAIRS, with a sealed letter]

CHARGE: (Bowing) A letter from Venice. For Lady Bianca.

BIANCA: For me?

CHARGE: Yes, my Lady. From Venice.

BIANCA: Yes, of course. (Takes the letter and examines it)

[Bows, EXIT CHARGE]

FRANC: I see block letters. Do you recognize the seal?

BIANCA: It's from my brother. I'll open it anon.

FRANC: I suppose we all must have our little secrets. Guard the letter as best you can, my Lady.

ELEA: Exactly so, if you would keep *your affairs*... discreet.

FRANC: Yes, Mother.

BIANCA: I'm sure it is nothing of any consequence. Of course, my brother is a worrier, so he very likely will ask how things fare here in Florence.

FRANC: (Feigned good humor) Read it then, unless you would have us think that you and your brother are spies of the Doge. No, better yet: part of Walsingham's network!

ELEA: (Playing along) Walsingham, maybe. But never the Doge, surely. Am I right, Lady Bianca?

FRANC: C'mon! If we know your brother's cares, we might assuage them.

BIANCA: (Hesitates) If it pleases my Lord, then yes, certainly.

[BIANCA breaks the seal. She scans the letter, her face clouds, then she folds it and clasps it to her bosom]

FRANC: Well?

BIANCA: I don't know what to say. It's personal and private, after all. I'm sorry.

FRANC: There can be no secrets between us!

ELEA: Really, Francesco! You should not insist!

FRANC: Until this moment, I hadn't considered that *I* am, now, the Grand Duke, and therefore the State. All intercourse between this city and another state is a matter of state. How else to secure my city? There can be no privacy! Give me the letter!

BIANCA: My Lord?

[FRANCESCO pulls the letter from BIANCA's hand and opens it]

FRANC: (Reads silently) Ah, Mother! Am I so unreasonable? See for yourself!
(Passes the letter) Read it!

ELEA: All right. (Reading aloud) "*An all-powerful hatred pursues you, and I have trembled many times for fear lest poison should put an end to your life. You must therefore take every possible means of escaping from that place. You must see that, for your sake, I remain, Your loving brother.*" (With cool composure) The writer is clearly unbalanced and fearful on all sides.²⁵

FRANC: (To Bianca) Have we not taken you in? Who would harm you, except your own father for reason of Pietro Buonaventuri?

BIANCA: I beg you, Duke. Think not upon it. My brother worries. He worries over everything, and this leads him betimes to flights of fancy. In private, I should have regarded this letter not at all! Please!

FRANC: If that pleases you, then I am satisfied.

[Silence. They feign momentary distraction]

ELEA: I see clouds are gathering.

FRANC: (Testily) Do you think it might rain? It's always raining somewhere. In Spain, mainly on the plain. They say.²⁶

COSIMO: Blue skies, gray skies. (Beginning slowly) Unfortunately, there is another matter; and it is most unfortunate the Lady Bianca need be apprised.

ELEA: Now, Cosimo?

COSIMO: Yes, now. Better now, yes.

BIANCA: Why unfortunate, kind Sir?

COSIMO: Misadventure is always unfortunate. It may befall anyone, Lady Bianca, even the Buonaventuri. In this instance, Pietro's uncle. He has died in prison.

BIANCA: Mm. Pietro's loss, maybe. I never met the man. I did not know him. In truth, I have been expecting such news – perhaps in this, my brother's letter.

COSIMO: Done then. That is the first instance of misadventure. There is another.

BIANCA: (Hesitates) Do you now mean Pietro?

ELEA: Yes, my dear. I'm sorry for your loss. He drowned in the Arno, drunk.

FRANC: Oh, how sad. Most regrettable and unfortunate – as you say, Father.

[BIANCA turns away]

COSIMO: My sincere condolences, Lady Bianca.

[No response]

ELEA: Have you nothing to say, young lady?

[A moment passes]

COSIMO: Lady Bianca?

BIANCA: What is there to say, Sir? Strange that he should drown? Yes, maybe that. He was, after all, a fish out of water.

ELEA: Well, you needn't worry your head. We shall see that mass is said. And arrange for proper burial. His family may have a plot somewhere.

BIANCA: (Turns to face them) Yes. Thank you. (Gathers herself) Well. Now that I have been apprised, some other matters surely need attention.

FRANC: (Cheerfully) Indeed! Life goes on! And before anything else, we must see Father off to Villa di Castello!

COSIMO: Why not.

ELEA: Is all prepared, Cosimo? Your trunk and satchels?

COSIMO: Yes, everything. Indeed, yes. A coach awaits me. It is passed time to go.

FRANC: This way, then. (Gesturing) Bianca?

BIANCA: Yes, of course.

ELEA: (Touching Cosimo) You, too, old man.
COSIMO: Just today, Eleanor, I wish you would refrain from saying that.
ELEA: You'll be out of earshot soon enough.
COSIMO: No, not nearly soon enough.
ELEA: I'll miss you, too, Husband.

[EXEUNT ALL]

Scene 2

(Late afternoon. Medici palace. In the kitchen.)

[The ASSISTANT and BAKER are talking. Others busily come and go.]

ASSIST: Oh, yes. I can tell you! She puts it on for him, all right!
BAKER: Oh, yeah?
ASSIST: Mink in the morning, sable of an afternoon, and then fox all night!
BAKER: Agh. Get outta here. Old joke, that.

[ENTER: CHARGE d'AFFAIRS, who samples a fresh loaf.]

[Staff gather around him, expectantly.]

BAKER: Well?
CHARGE: What is this, something novel?
BAKER: Do you like it?
CHARGE: I'm not sure. It doesn't taste like anything.
MAID: (Sweeping) I don't like it. Move yer feet.
COOK 1: Well, I *do* like it!
COOK 2: Me, too.
COOK 3: I don't, and that's that.
CHARGE: What is it?

BAKER: *It's what it is! Bread!*

CHARGE: Not any bread known to me.

COOK 2: You know wheat, don't you?

CHARGE: Of course. And rye, oats, millet, gluten, and flax!

COOK 1: Flax? You eat flax bread?! How strange.

CHARGE: Sometimes I eat it. Not always.

COOK 1: Imagine that! Flax!

BAKER: Ha! There's flax in with this, and you said you liked it!

COOK 1: Had I known, I wouldn't 've touched it!

BAKER: See?! Now your brain is clogged! Flaxophobia.

COOK 1: And what is that?

BAKER: In this kitchen, a new plague.

COOK: Plague? What did you call it?

BAKER: Flaxophobia.

COOK 1: And it's carried by rats?

BAKER: Never mind.

COOK 1: Well, I never heard of it!

BAKER: That's because it's new.

COOK 1: Must come with the bread, then!

BAKER: Agh! One bite you like it, the next bite... (Shaking his head)

CHARGE: Well, are you going to tell me what all's in this?

BAKER: (Counting fingers) Flax, rye, wheat, oats, millet, gluten, and...

COOK 3: And them caraway seeds! (Shivers) Ugh!

MAID: Them's not caraway, them's sesame!

COOK: Even worse!

MAID: Move yer feet!

[ENTER: ASSISTANT]

ASSIST: I like that bread. It's new. And, I have some news!

BAKER: Ah, you've come from the market! Good news, I hope!

ASSIST: I don't know if it's good or not...

BAKER: Well, spill it!

ASSIST: The Pope died. Day before yesterday, I think!

COOKS 1, 2, 3: Oh! / No! / Oh, dear! (They cross themselves)

BAKER: Hm. Two days? Bad news travels fast. Even from Rome!

MAID: Well, God take his soul... if he'll have it. (Crosses herself)

BAKER: Pius IV, gone! Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

CHARGE: Wonder what?

BAKER: Oh, I don't know. What might be in store for the Archbishop, is all.

CHARGE: Ferdinando? Now there's a thought!

ASSIST: You should hear the rumors flying! They say the Inquisition...

CHARGE: Gossip, no doubt! Confusion! Conflicting accounts. Is it natural or unnatural. That sort of rot.

ASSIST: For sure, everyone's going on about it! The Inquisition this, the Inquisition that!

CHARGE: Ratfuckers!

BAKER: What?

CHARGE: The word-twisting informants from Rome. The plotters. That's what they call themselves.

BAKER: What?! Ratfuckers?

CHARGE: The same. They take perverse pride in being what they are: sewers ²⁷ of confusion and false accusations who, of course, point their fingers elsewhere.

BAKER: Ha! *Ratfuckers*. That's a good one!

COOK 1: (Shaking her head) Such language!
COOK 2: (Feigns stopping her ears) My word!
COOK 3: (To the others) C'mon. We don't have to listen to this!
BAKER: How right you are! Go on then!
COOKS: Humpf!

[EXEUNT COOKS]

CHARGE: The Inquisition is no joke. One never knows, with the Dominicans. They are the radical wing. Pope Paul, of the Carafa family...

BAKER: Paul IV? The one before Pius?

CHARGE: Yes. Half a Carafa short of a full carafe. You know of his Index?

BAKER: The list of forbidden books?

CHARGE: The same. Pius inherited the list. Do you know what's on it? Half are books commissioned by the Medici. Translations, usually.

BAKER: Yeah? Gimme a for instance.

CHARGE: Master Niccolo, for one. *The Prince*. *The Mandragora*.

BAKER: Yeah, I know about that stuff. Everyone's always repeating it. Quoting it, I mean.

CHARGE: Rare ones, too. Books on alchemy. The *Meditations* of Saint Asphasia. A gnostic *Letter to the Hippopotami* of Pseudo-Augustine of Hippo. Histories. And, the writings of Marcus Twaineus the Elder.

BAKER: Never heard of him.

CHARGE: A philosopher of the old republic. But, most regrettable in this polluted age, is the banning of *De Spiritu Congestio* by St. Sinusitis.

[ENTER: MAID, in great agitation]

MAID: Oh, my God! Dear God in Heaven! She's fallen down the stairs!

BAKER: What's this?

MAID: Lady Giovanna!

[ENTER: the three COOKS, excited, but less so]

COOK 3: Have you told them?

MAID: Yes!

COOK 2: Head first it was!

MAID: Oh, my God!

CHARGE: When?

COOK 1: Not a minute ago!

CHARGE: Arrrgh! (He runs out)

[EXIT CHARGE]

[ENTER: ASSISTANT]

BAKER: (To Assistant) Well?

ASSIST: The surgeons have come. But she's dead. Lady Giovanna is dead.

BAKER: Oh, this really is too much! First Pietro. Then the Pope. Well? Oh, to hell with it! I'm seeing for myself!

ASSIST: I'm with you!

COOK 1: (To Cooks 2 and 3) C'mon! There's safety in numbers.

[EXEUNT ALL]

Scene 3

(A chamber of the Medici Palace. Candles. Giovanna lies in state.)

[ENTER, BIANCA, who is alone.]

BIANCA: So here you are. It is I, Bianca. How well you look in white, Giovanna, and this seeming peaceful sleep becomes you. Strange, to regret our too short acquaintance. Might we not have been friends in other circumstances? Another time and place. What is the inscription? "*Enemies on the battlefield / Brothers in the silence of the sepulchre*"? Of course, we could not have been brothers, except in some other life. For now, one remains, the other does not – at least for a time, Giovanna, for a time. A blink in which we all seize the day, for things are as they are. Are they not? What beatitude or virtue applies here and elsewhere? Perhaps we might have discussed the Sermon on the Mount; or Master Niccolo against the Nicomachean Ethics. Does one view take precedence, I wonder, over the other? As a practical matter, I mean. You will excuse, I trust, this seeming incoherence. But, were you in my slippers... Then again, let's not go into that. Instead, I will leave you with a question. A poser, one might say. It is sometimes said that, if mothers ruled this world, the wars of the fathers would cease. Believe you that, Giovanna? No need to reply. Rest now, and good night.

[EXIT, BIANCA]

[A moment passes. ENTER: ELEANOR and FERDINANDO]

FERD: Wretched sight! Untimely!

ELEA: Untimely, yet convenient. Perhaps. Perhaps.

FERD: Rue this day, Mother!

ELEA: (Looking about) What is it in me that wants to say 'At least everything appears in order'? Poor Giovanna.

FERD: Did you ever even like her? She missed Vienna, and no wonder.

ELEA: No, I cannot say that I liked her. But I think we understood each other. In this world, that's nothing to sniff at. (Lends him her handkerchief) Your nose, my son. You cared for her, didn't you.

FERD: (Uses his sleeve) As much as I care for anyone.

ELEA: Yes, well. It is late. There's a mass in the morning. It has been a too long day. You'll excuse me.

FERD: Good night, Mother.

[EXIT, ELEANOR]

FERD: (Mumbling) Giovanna, Giovanna. Ensconced, one hopes, in eternity.
Oh, ye unfeeling stone-faced gods! I abjure the lot of you, I swear it!

[ENTER, FRANCESCO]

FRANC: Then you would stand against the hosts of Heaven?

FERD: Or Hell! Even Mount Olympus!

FRANC: How Promethean.

FERD: Mock me not, Francesco.

FRANC: Oh? You forget yourself, my yet-to-be ordained archbishop. And you forget your sponsor is gone.

FERD: I will need neither Uncle nor the Inquisition to get to the bottom of this!

FRANC: What is it you suspect? Or even more, expect?

FERD: Down the line, a skull wearing a crown. For now, a dietary supplement. One need only run a reed into her stomach to remove a sample.

FRANC: Aren't we clever. She fell. So run your experiments. Put samples in your exotic solutions and wait for coagulation or color to change. And if you should make it change, what is that to me? What would it be to anyone, but a question of interpretation. So proceed, dear brother! Do your worst! Bring on your Doctors as you will; then I'll bring mine.

FERD: Fine!

[EXIT, FERDINANDO]

[In the opposite direction, EXIT FRANCESCO]

[LIGHTS down]

Scene 4

(Some days later. A courtyard of the Medici Palace, before noon.)

[ENTER: ELEANOR, alone. She walks about, musing to herself, then sits upon a bench.]

ELEA: (Abstractly) It's nearly noon, but there's time to leave today.

[ENTER: FRANCESCO and BIANCA]

ELEA: Ah. And how is the bride?

BIANCA: Still too soon, Mother, to be accustomed to it.

FRANC: But it's been a week, Bianca. Surely that is time enough!

ELEA: Yes, but no.

BIANCA: Your mother is right, Francesco. The funeral was barely a month ago!

ELEA: Indeed. My son does move quickly.

FRANC: Why waste time? Will you join us, Mother, for a celebratory brunch?

ELEA: I've breakfasted, thank you. (Lightly) But if we could wait until *dunch*...

BIANCA: Ha! *Linner*, you mean!

ELEA: Yes. Whatever.

FRANC: So be it. We'll just have to eat without you!

ELEA: Then you'll excuse me.

[EXIT, ELEANOR]

BIANCA: She'll never accept me, Francesco!

FRANC: I wouldn't worry about it. She'll soon be gone to Villa di Castello.

[ENTER : CHARGE d'AFFAIRS, carrying a tray]

CHARGE: Here you are, Your Highness. Some light wine.

FRANC: Taste it, then.

[CHARGE tastes the wine, nods that it is good, pours two glasses, and serves]

FRANC: (Passes a glass to Bianca. Tastes.) Mm! What say you, Bianca?

BIANCA: (Drinks) Is this the new pinot?

FRANC: It is. Do you like it?

BIANCA: It's wonderful! Imagine how it will be in five years!

FRANC: Or ten!

CHARGE: Excuse me.

[EXIT, CHARGE d'AFFAIRS]

BIANCA: My Lord, a toast to your son?

FRANC: Why, of course! God grant it is a son!

[They drink]

[ENTER : CHARGE d'AFFAIRS, carrying a tray]

CHARGE: Canapés, my Lord. Quail and crayfish.

FRANC: Good! (Points) If you would please, eat that one.

[CHARGE takes the piece and eats]

CHARGE: Delicious, my Lord! (Sets down the tray upon a table)

BIANCA: I love crayfish! (Takes one and eats)

FRANC: (Eats one) Mm. Walnut paste, I believe.

CHARGE: It is. Excuse me, Highnesses.

[EXIT, CHARGE d'AFFAIRS]

FRANC: What do you think? Is this little repast worthy of a new Grand Duchess?

BIANCA: One hopes to be worthy of it!

FRANC: (Chuckles) How could one have any doubt?

[ENTER : CHARGE d'AFFAIRS, carrying a tray, while licking his fingers. He makes a good-humored show of this.]

CHARGE: I couldn't resist, Your Excellencies!

BIANCA: (Chidingly) How like a little boy you are, stealing icing from a cake!
Shame on you!

FRANC: (Playfully) Needs a good spanking, does he?

CHARGE: (Bows) Your Highness.

FRANC: Well, how is it?

CHARGE: Chef Allesandro's new recipe, my Lord Duke. Tangy! But *very* good!

FRANC: Excellent!

CHARGE: Chef Allesandro asks my Lord to guess the liqueur.

FRANC: Mmm. It *does* look good. Here now... (Feeds her with his fingers)

BIANCA: (Taking the morsel in her mouth) Mm. What's in it?

FRANC: (Takes a bite) A brandy. With some herb or another. (Takes another bite) Chartreuse, perhaps?

CHARGE: It is, my Lord. A gift of the French ambassador, to your mother.

FRANC: Oh? I know nothing of this. (Coughs)

CHARGE: My mistake. Not your mother, Highness. Your brother.

FRANC: My brother? (Coughs) A French ambassador?

CHARGE: (Bows) Excuse me, Your Highness.

FRANC: Yes, all right.

[EXIT, CHARGE d'AFFAIRS]

BIANCA: (Takes another bite. Coughs) Wrong pipe!

FRANC: (Coughs) That's two of us! (Coughs again)

BIANCA: (Gags) I feel ill!

FRANC: (Coughs again) Sip some wine. (Begins to pour, but then gags as well)

BIANCA: My God, Francesco! (Grabs his sleeve, but begins to slip)

FRANC: Bianca!

[BIANCA vomits and slips to the ground]

FRANC: Bian- ... (Vomits)

[FRANCESCO collapses. Then, BIANCA.]

[A moment passes]

[ENTER: CHARGE d’AFFAIRS, who calmly collects the food, drink, and glassware]

[EXIT, CHARGE d’AFFAIRS]

[A long moment passes.]

[ENTER: ELEANOR, distracted, who notices the bodies and hurries to them.]

ELEA: Good god! Guard! Somebody!

[ENTER: GUARD]

GUARD: What’s this?

ELEA: Dead. (Shakes her head) They are dead. Have someone help you bring them inside.

GUARD: Your Highness!

[EXIT, GUARD]

ELEA: This palazzo is a charnel house! O, Cosimo! Alas, for Florence!

[EXIT, ELEANOR]

[LIGHTS down]

Scene 5

(The ballroom. Temporary constellations of MASKERS are weaving onstage, in and out from the wings. These are chatting, laughing, and posing. Other MASKERS revolve continuously unless */STOPPED/*, yet music continues. The movements of ALL masks should reiterate closely the choreography of Act IV, Scene 3.)

[MUSIC down.]

[The MASKERS are in their positions, but motionless, as though frozen in time.]

[ENTER: FERDINANDO]

[Spotlight on]

FERD: What a night, to follow such a day! This Florence, our fair city, shall be great again! We shall wipe the tears from our eyes, forgetting our many losses, erasing unsettled memory, and, like our forefathers, exult and seize the day! On this night, we celebrate the best of our tradition: our freedoms and open exchange. Our marketplace of ideas. Our geniuses and benefactors. We have accomplished much, these one hundred years: illuminated shadows; cast light upon superstition; reinstated rationality. We have overcome fanaticism and intolerance. We look to the future, as we seek the just, the good, and the beautiful. Are we not children of giants, standing on their shoulders? Shall we not see farther than they? Shall we not go farther? For surely, whatever we might imagine, the same we can bring to be! And whatever *can* be brought to be, *will* be brought to be! This then, be our destiny, as we take courage! Now drink, and play on! (Claps hands imperatively)

[Spotlight off]

[MUSIC up. ALL MASKERS begin to move. Dancing commences with an allemande, followed by a minuet.]

[FERDINANDO assumes a high-backed throne]

/Stopped/

[Spot on]

MASKER 1: Tell me now: Is he fit to rule?

MASKER 2: Does it matter? The world turns, and life goes on.

MASKER 1: For you, then, it's business as usual.

MASKER 2: Don't be a cynic!

MASKER 1: In the old sense?

MASKER 2: No, the new.

[Spot off]

/Continues/

[A minuet, in its entirety]

/Stopped/

[Spot on]

MASKER 3: [Woman] Have you heard the surgeons' reports?

MASKER 4: [Man] Indeed I have. The viscera were greenish, suggesting malaria. On the other hand, the viscera were reddish, which speaks of arsenic.²⁸

MASKER 3: Evidence like the color of money.

MASKER 4: Unless the doctors are color-blind. That might depend.

MASKER 3: (Drolly) Upon which brother forces a pouch into which doctor's hand.

MASKER 4: I didn't say that. In fact, I would never. I categorically deny...

MASKER 3: Then never mind. Let's from pouch to bounce! Would you care to dance?

MASKER 4: You know that I don't dance. I cannot. My feet are stuck in mud.

MASKER 3: Then we'll muddle through together, as we always do.

[Spot off]

/Continues/

[A moment passes]

[ENTER: CHARGE d'AFFAIRS, carrying a document]

/Stopped/

[Spot on]

CHARGE: (Bows) Your Excellency. A communication from Venice.

ELEA: And what of Venice?

FERD: (Accepts the document, then crumples it) It's nothing. We have put Venice on notice. The Signory are displeased, but those who dislike present policy are free to leave this city.

ELEA: (Tired) I think it is time for me to make my way to Villa di Castello. Tomorrow, perhaps. Yes, tomorrow.

[FERDINANDO sees a beautiful young woman]

FERD: (To the Charge d'Affairs) *Who* is this vision?

CHARGE: Your Excellency, she is the daughter of the French ambassador.

FERD: Is he noble?

CHARGE: He is, Your Excellency.

FERD: (To Eleanor) You always seem to know who is who, and what is what.

ELEA: Do I?

FERD: A name, Mother, a name. Tell me, if you know it!

ELEA: Yes, my son. Her name is Blanche Capiteau.

FERD: Is it? (Appreciatively) Oh, my.

/Continues/

[FERDINANDO's eyes follow her. He rises from the throne, joins the dance, and cuts in.]

[The MUSIC continues, the LIGHTS go gradually down, and the CURTAIN closes.]

{END of PLAY}

ENDNOTES

- 1) Stendahl is correct on this point, yet his “Cardinal Jean de Medici” is Giovanni Angelo de Medici, otherwise Pope Pius IV (1559-1565). In 1562, “Cardinal Jean” made Ferdinando (age 13 or 14, according to different sources) an Archbishop.
- 2) “*Who e’er did love, who did not love at first sight?*” A line borrowed from Shakespeare, who borrowed it from Christopher Marlowe. God knows where Kit got it.
- 3) “*I have a nurse, Helena-Maria.*” In memoriam, Helen Mary Kueneman.
- 4) “*...hazel eyes, as farsighted as a falcon’s.*” Astigmatic when older, however, and subject to increasingly annoying *floaters*.
- 5) *sistiere*. That is, *a sixth*, as Venice was divided into six administrative districts.
- 6) “That upstart will end his days like Abelard, singing *Planctus virginium* in the upper register in Lower Brittany!” After his secret marriage to Heloïse, Abelard was castrated on orders of Canon Fulbert. Later, Abelard spent time at a monastery in Brittany. A handful of Abelard’s musical compositions survive, including *Planctus virginium*.
- 7) *The Paraclete*. Name of a priory established by Abelard, and where Heloïse was prioress.
- 8) The episode of Abram (Abraham) passing off Sarai (Sarah) as his sister may be found in *Genesis* at 12:11-13.
- 9) “*You’ve got to have pork chops and sweet potatoes.*” Advice from Earl W. Gardner, Sr., who did not stutter, at all. Nor did he work for Banco Salviati.
- 10) “*Words have meaning!*” Arguably no longer the case.
- 11) It is doubtful that the real Cosimo ever said anything so silly. Cf. Bonaparte / Malaparte.
- 12) This is the first of several remarks, even speeches, lifted and adapted from Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. All the Medici in this play have a tendency to paraphrase Master Niccolo.
- 13) “*Cannibalism Among Native Plants*” Eng. trans. by Jaime del Rio Diego y Santiago, PhD (Manshu International University).
- 14) *Cappello Chess*. A well-known variant is Capablanca Chess.
- 15) Paraphrase of Kenneth Rexroth’s translation.
- 16) *Fra Pandolf* is the portrait painter in Robert Browning’s poem, *My Last Duchess*.

- 17) *Tridentine Profession*. The profession of faith promulgated by Pius IV.
- 18) "... a little broad." A nod to Christopher Fry's play, *The Lady's Not For Burning*, in Act Two: (Thomas to Jenet) "Don't purse your lips like a little prude at the humour of annihilation. It is somewhat broad, I admit, but we're not children."
- 19) Cf. "*Veni, vidi, vici*." – Julius Caesar.
- 20) "*What the World Needs Now*" Song by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, recorded by Jackie De Shannon (ca. 1965). This is not an anachronism. Being drunk, Pietro is channeling.
- 21) "...don all trumpery." Unless one would rather not, think *Maison Blanche* and the next four years. (Today is Monday, 6 February 2017. Yesterday, the author completed this play's Scene 3 of Act Five. Later in the day, he received an e-mail with a hyperlink to an official video preview of *The Medici*, a television series. He was not pleased to learn of this. He is still not smiling and is composing these notes now, while deciding whether to bother finishing his damn play.)
- 22) Nod to Stendahl: *The Charterhouse of Parma* ("La Chartreuse de Parme"), keeping in mind Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery!" Apparently, *nunnery* was Elizabethan slang for "brothel".
- 23) *Pazzi*. The Pazzi Conspiracy involved banking families and a pope acting in concert against the Medici. See *Hannibal* (2003), a docudrama scripted by David Mamet.
- 24) Again, Christopher Fry's play, in Act One: (Thomas Mendip) "Where can I find a longitude with no platitude?"
- 25) Grand Dame Eleanor's locution for *paranoia*; i.e., an acute sense of reality.
- 26) G.B. Shaw, *Pygmalion*: "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain."
- 27) *Sewers*. Either pronunciation and both significations may work here. Consumers may choose.

[All right, now finish the damn play.]

28) Two autopsy records from the 16th century give different explanations for the cause of death. Based upon the color of viscera, one report claims for arsenic, the other claims for malaria. Tests conducted since 2006 support both explanations, which leaves matters where they stood four hundred years ago. in confrontation with a coincidence.

Meanwhile, Wikipedia: "In 2006, forensic and toxicology experts at the University of Florence reported evidence of arsenic poisoning [in Bianca's remains] in a study published in the British Medical Journal, but in 2010 evidence of the parasite *Plasmodium falciparum*, which causes malaria, was found in Francesco's remains." In this scenario, by coincidence, one died from arsenic poisoning, the other died from malaria – "at the same time" (within a period of 12-48 hours, depending upon the source).

APPENDIX

Extrait de Stendahl :

Vers l'an **1563**, Pietro Buonaventuri, jeune Florentin, aimable et sans fortune, quitta sa patrie pour chercher un meilleur sort. Il s'arrêta dans Venise, chez un marchand de son pays, dont la maison se trouvait située précisément dans la ruelle du palais Capello. La façade, suivant l'usage, donnait sur le canal. Il n'était bruit dans la ville que de la beauté de Bianca, la fille du maître de ce palais, et de la sévérité avec laquelle on la gardait.

Bianca ne pouvait, sous aucun prétexte, paraître aux fenêtres qui donnaient sur le canal; elle s'en dédommageait en prenant l'air tous les soirs à une petite fenêtre très-élevée, qui avait jour sur la rue étroite habitée par Buonaventuri. Il la vit et l'aima; mais quelle apparence de s'en faire aimer? Un pauvre marchand prétendre à une fille de la première noblesse, et la plus recherchée de Venise! Il voulut renoncer à une passion chimérique. L'amour le ramenait toujours sous la petite fenêtre. Un de ses amis, le voyant au désespoir, lui représenta qu'il valait mieux trouver la mort en marchant au bonheur que périr comme un sot; que d'ailleurs avec sa bonne mine et la tyrannie du père, faire connaître sa passion serait peut-être triompher.

A force de signes faits à la hâte, lorsque personne ne paraissait dans la rue, Pierre parvint à dire qu'il aimait; mais il ne fallait pas seulement penser à s'ouvrir la maison du plus fier des hommes. Comme en Orient, la moindre tentative eût été punie de mort, peut-être sur les deux amants.

La nécessité leur fit inventer un langage. La nécessité fit que cette beauté si dédaigneuse consentit à se procurer la clef d'une petite porte qui ouvrait sur la rue, et à venir donner un premier rendez-vous au jeune Florentin, démarche hardie qui ne put avoir lieu que de nuit, pendant le sommeil des gens. Ces tendres rendez-vous furent renouvelés, et avec le résultat qu'on peut penser. Bianca sortait toutes les nuits, laissait la porte un peu bâillée, et rentrait avant le jour.

Une fois elle s'oublia dans les bras de son amant. Un garçon boulanger, qui allait de grand matin prendre le pain dans une maison voisine, apercevant une porte entr'ouverte, crut bien faire de la tirer à lui. Bianca, arrivant un moment après, se vit perdue; elle prend son parti, remonte chez Buonaventuri, frappe tout doucement. Il ouvre. La mort était certaine pour elle. Leur sort devient commun; ils courent demander asile à un riche marchand de Florence, établi dans un quartier perdu. Avant que le jour achevât de paraître, tout était fini, et nulle trace de leur évasion ne pouvait les trahir. Le difficile était de sortir de Venise.

Le père de Bianca, et surtout son oncle Grimani, patriarche d'Aquilée, faisaient éclater l'indignation la plus violente; ils prétendaient que tout le corps de la noblesse vénitienne était insulté en eux. Ils firent jeter en prison un oncle de Buonaventuri, qui mourut dans les fers; ils obtinrent du sénat l'ordre de courir sus au ravisseur, avec une récompense de deux mille ducats à qui le tuerait. On fit partir des assassins pour les principales villes d'Italie.

Les jeunes amants étaient toujours dans Venise. Vingt fois ils furent sur le point d'être pris. Dix mille espions, et les plus fins du monde, voulaient avoir les deux mille ducats; enfin une barque chargée de foin trompa tous les yeux, et ils purent gagner Florence. Là, dans une petite maison que Buonaventuri avait sur la Via Larga, ils se tinrent fort cachés. Bianca ne sortait jamais. Lui ne se hasardait que bien armé. C'était justement le temps que le vieux Côme Ier, dégoûté de cette longue suite de dissimulations et de perfidies qui avaient fait son règne, venait de laisser les soins du gouvernement à son fils D. François, prince d'un caractère plus sombre encore et plus sévère. Un favori vint lui dire que dans une petite maison de sa capitale vivait cachée cette Bianca Capello dont la beauté et la disparition singulière avaient fait tant de bruit à Venise. De ce moment, François eut une nouvelle existence; tous les jours on le voyait se promener des heures entières dans la Via Larga. On sent que tous les moyens furent mis en usage; ils n'eurent aucun succès.

Bianca, qui ne sortait jamais, se mettait presque tous les soirs à la fenêtre; elle portait un voile; mais le prince pouvait l'entrevoir, et sa passion n'eut plus de bornes. Cette affaire parut sérieuse au favori; il en fit confidence à sa femme. Éblouie du degré de faveur où parviendrait son mari, si la maîtresse régnante lui devait sa place, elle prit le prétexte des malheurs qu'avait éprouvés la jeune Vénitienne, et des dangers qui la menaçaient encore. Elle envoya une vénérable matrone, qui lui fait entendre que la grande dame a quelque chose d'important à lui communiquer, et, pour parler en toute liberté, la prie de lui faire l'honneur de venir dîner chez elle. Cette invitation parut très-singulière. Les amants hésitèrent longtemps; mais le rang de la dame et le besoin qu'on avait de protection firent consentir. Bianca parut; je ne parle point de l'empressement et des tendresses de la réception. Il fallut conter son aventure: on l'écouta avec un intérêt si marqué, on lui fit des offres si obligeantes, qu'il fallut promettre de revenir, et d'être sensible à une amitié qui, en naissant, était déjà passion.

Le prince, charmé de cette première entrevue, espéra qu'il pourrait être de la seconde. Bianca reçut bientôt une nouvelle invitation. La conversation tomba sur les dangers que pouvait faire courir la vengeance d'un père irrité. Il y avait des exemples cruels. Enfin on lui demanda si elle ne serait point curieuse de faire sa cour au prince héréditaire, qui, l'ayant aperçue à sa fenêtre, n'avait pu s'empêcher d'admirer tant de charmes, et désirait vivement lui présenter ses respects. Bianca fut un peu troublée; cet honneur dangereux mettait fin à toutes ses transes, et, quoiqu'elle affectât de s'en défendre, la dame crut voir dans ses yeux qu'un peu de violence ne l'offenserait pas. Le prince arriva sur ces entrefaites, d'un air qui parut naturel et honnête: ses offres de services, ses éloges respectueux, la modestie de ses manières, éloignaient la défiance.

Bianca, qui n'avait nul usage, ne vit en lui qu'un ami. Il y eut d'autres rencontres. Buonaventuri lui-même n'eut pas l'idée de rompre une relation qui pouvait être à la fois honnête et utile.

Mais le prince était éperdument amoureux; Bianca, un peu ennuyée de passer ses beaux jours en prison, à Florence comme à Venise. Elle lui devait de pouvoir sortir sans crainte. Il augmenta, sous divers prétextes, la fortune du mari, et s'attacha la femme, de plus en plus, par la simplicité et la tendresse de ses manières; elle résista longtemps; enfin François parvint à former entre Bianca, Buonaventuri et lui ce qu'on appelle en Italie un *triangolo equilatero*.

Le jeune couple prit une grande maison dans le plus beau quartier de Florence. Le mari s'accoutuma bientôt à son nouvel état; il se mêla parmi la noblesse, qui, comme on pense, le reçut fort bien; mais, fier de sa nouvelle fortune, il en usa avec une insolence assez ridicule. Indiscret et téméraire avec tout le monde, et même envers le prince, il finit par se faire assassiner.

Cet incident n'affligea que médiocrement les deux amants. L'amabilité et la folle gaieté de la jeune Vénitienne, ce sont les Français de l'Italie, captivaient le prince tous les jours davantage. Plus Médicis était sombre et sévère, plus il avait besoin d'être distrait par la vivacité et les grâces de Bianca. Née dans l'opulence, aimant le luxe, et ne se croyant avec raison inférieure à personne par la naissance, elle paraissait en souveraine dans les rues de la capitale.

La véritable souveraine, qu'on appelait, je ne sais pourquoi, la reine Jeanne, prit les choses au tragique, et, la trouvant un jour sur le pont de la Trinité, voulait la faire jeter dans l'Arno. Elle n'en fit rien, mais peu après mourut de douleur. Le grand-duc, touché de cette mort, et cédant aux représentations de son frère, le cardinal de Médicis, s'éloigna quelque temps de Florence pour rompre avec Bianca. Il lui envoya même un ordre de quitter la Toscane. Mais quelle considération peut l'emporter, dans un coeur sombre, sur le charme de tous les instants d'être aimé par une femme heureuse et gaie? Bianca, qui avait de l'esprit, gagna le confesseur, et, moins de deux mois après la mort de la grande-duchesse, elle se fit épouser en secret.

Le grand-duc annonça son mariage à Venise. Une délibération des *pregadi* déclara Bianca fille adoptive de la république; deux ambassadeurs suivis de quatre-vingt-dix nobles furent envoyés à Florence pour solenniser à la fois

l'adoption de Saint-Marc et le mariage. Les fêtes données pour cette cérémonie si flatteuse pour la belle Vénitienne coûtèrent trois cent mille ducats. Elle fut grande-duchesse; son portrait est à la galerie de Florence. Je ne sais si c'est la faute de la manière dure du Bronzino; mais ces yeux si beaux ont quelque chose de funeste.

Bianca trouva l'ambition et ses fureurs sur les marches du trône. Jusque-là, elle n'avait été que jolie femme et amoureuse. Elle voulut donner un héritier à son mari, et ne pas se voir un jour la sujette de son beau-frère. On consulta les astrologues de la cour: on fit dire nombre de messes. Tous ces moyens se trouvant sans effet, la duchesse eut recours à son confesseur, cordelier à la grand-manche du couvent d'Ogni Santi, qui se chargea de conduire à bien cette grande entreprise. Elle eut des dégoûts, des nausées, et même garda le lit; elle reçut les compliments de toute la cour. Le grand-duc était ravi. Le temps des couches étant à peu près arrivé, Bianca fut surprise au milieu de la nuit par des douleurs si vives, qu'elle demanda impatiemment son confesseur. Le cardinal, qui savait tout, se lève, descend dans l'antichambre de sa belle-soeur, et là se met à se promener tranquillement en disant son bréviaire. La grande-duchesse l'envoie prier de se retirer; elle n'osait lui faire entendre les cris que la douleur allait lui arracher: le cruel cardinal répond froidement: «Dite a sua altezza che attenda pure a fare l'offizio suo, che io dico il mio. -- Dites à S. A. que je la supplie de faire son affaire; moi, je fais la mienne.»

Le confesseur arrive, le cardinal va à lui, l'embrasse pieusement: «Soyez le bienvenu, mon père, la princesse a grand besoin de vos secours,» et, tout en le serrant dans ses bras, il sent facilement un gros garçon que le cordelier apportait dans sa manche. «Dieu soit loué, continue le cardinal, la grande-duchesse est heureusement accouchée, et d'un garçon encore,» et il montre son prétendu neveu aux courtisans ébahis.

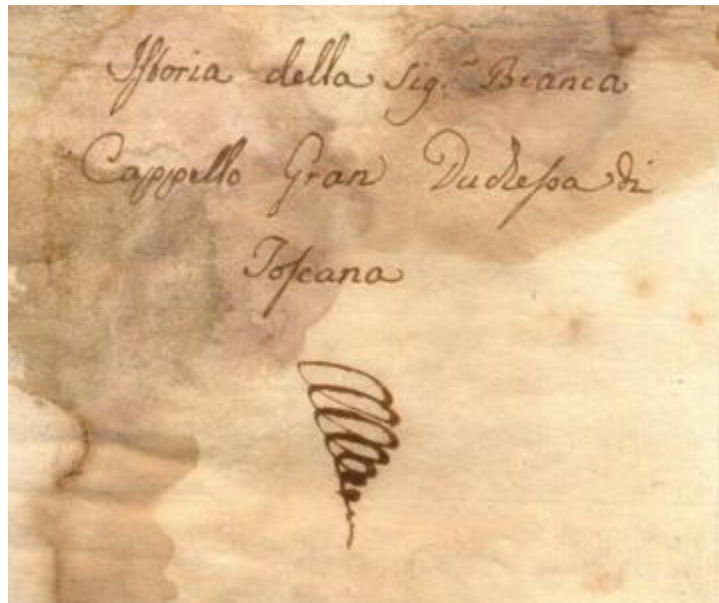
Bianca entendit ce propos de son lit: on juge de sa fureur par l'ennui et le ridicule d'une si longue comédie. L'amour du grand-duc lui ôtait toute inquiétude sur les suites de sa vengeance. Une occasion se présente; ils étaient tous les trois à la belle villa de Poggio a Cajano, où ils avaient la même table. La duchesse, remarquant que le cardinal aimait fort le *blanc-manger*, en fit apprêter un qui était empoisonné. Le cardinal fut averti; il ne laissa pas de se rendre à table comme à l'ordinaire. Malgré les instances réitérées de sa belle-soeur, il ne veut pas toucher à ce plat; il songeait aux moyens de la convaincre, lorsque le grand-duc dit: «Eh bien! si mon frère ne veut pas de son plat favori, j'en prendrai, moi,» et il s'en sert une assiette. Bianca ne pouvait l'arrêter sans dévoiler le crime, et perdre à jamais son amour. Elle sentit que tout était fini pour elle, et prit son parti avec la même rapidité que jadis, lorsqu'elle trouva fermée la porte de son père. Elle se servit du blanc-manger comme son mari, et tous les deux moururent le 19 octobre 1587. Le cardinal succéda à son frère, prit le nom de Ferdinand Ier, et régna jusqu'en 1608.

NOTE on Historical Accuracy.

As one can see, the author of this play did not read Stendahl too carefully. Further, Stendahl's account does not always accord with current scholarship, which itself is divided. Sometimes a difference lies in dates for particular events, sometimes in explanations for the manner of deaths. Did Giovanna (Johanna d'Austria) fall from a stair or die in childbirth? Did Francesco take up with Bianca before or after marrying Giovanna? As to manner of death(s), see Endnote 28.

In this play, many liberties have been taken. For example, Francesco was the alchemist and not Ferdinando, although both were equally vengeful. Their sister, the dynamic Isabella (who was murdered), has been completely ignored, entirely and altogether, and her influence replaced by

that of Eleanor, who was already dead when the play commences. Consequently, a question presents itself: Why all these flip-flops, conflations, and misrepresentations? For reason of economy – our *raison d'état* in this post-truth Orwellian world of alternative facts. Finally, and this is very much out of fashion, *Pietro & Bianca* is an ‘historical’ play which pretends to hold up a mirror, however darkly, to the present. In this case, ‘the present’ means the life-span of the author. To quote the Swan of Avon: Use your imagination. Good luck, Mary Elizabeth.



Meg – I probably should mention that the word *ratfuckers* is not entirely gratuitous. It was the name that Watergate conspirators gave to themselves, in the days of their tampering. – Gramps

All Rights Reserved

8 February 2017

James Gardner

(writing as “Gardner Rich”)

Written while trailing

Robert Bolt, Christopher Fry, Marc Norman, John Orloff, Tom Stoppard,

and all the other Elizabethans of the Second Reign.